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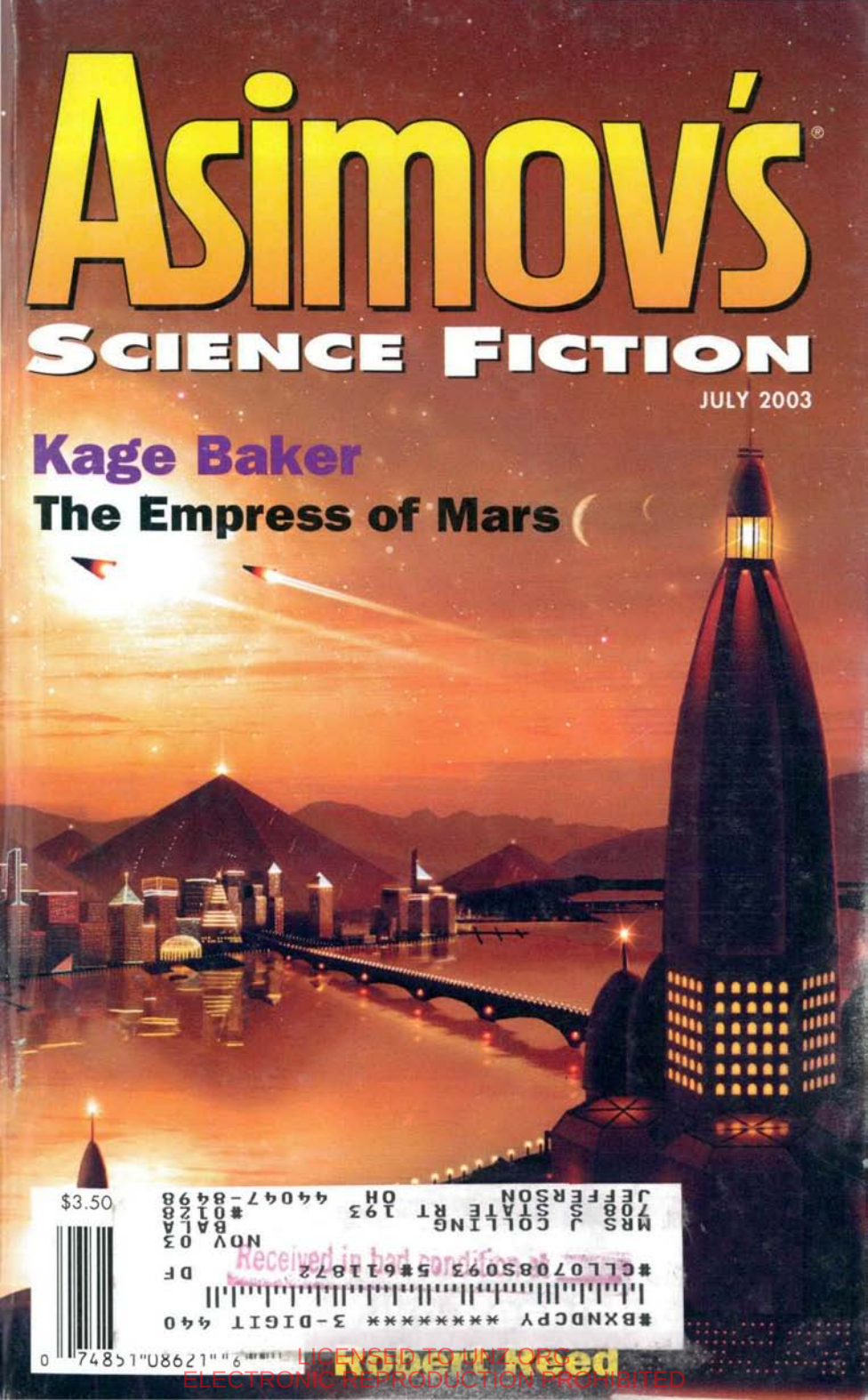

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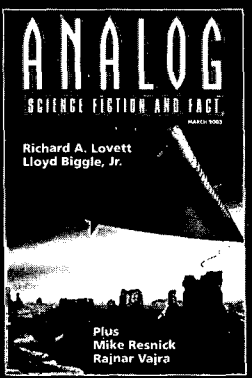

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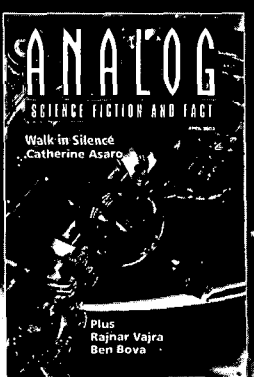

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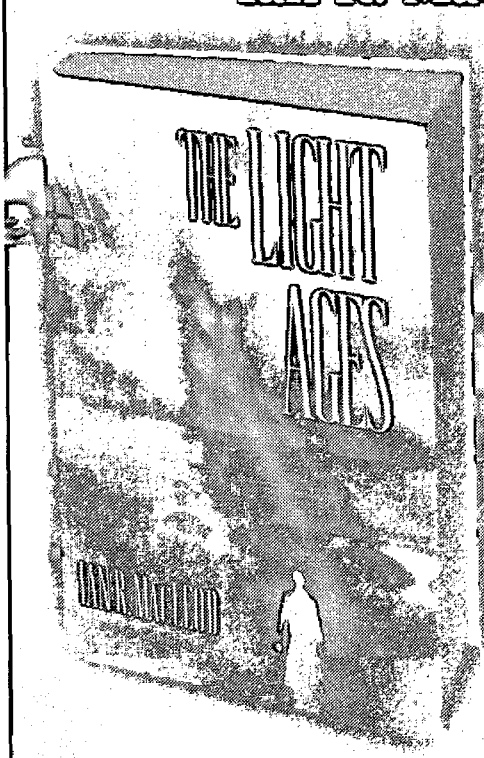

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Asimov's Science Fiction

JULY 2003

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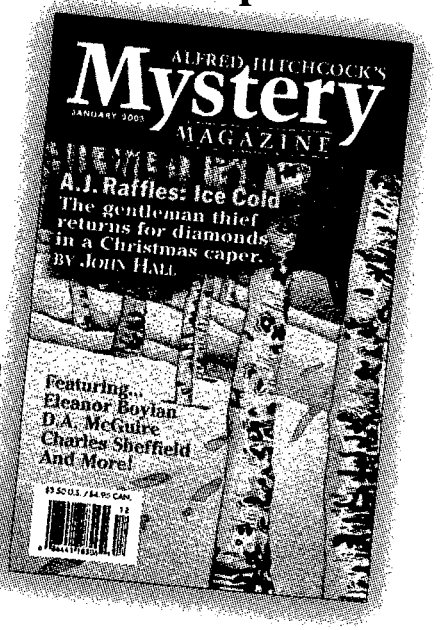

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

WHEN THERE WAS NO INTERNET

We all take it for granted by now. Boot up, buzz screech, click click, and here come Yahoo, eBay, Amazon.com, and the day's e-mail from far and wide. And yet there was a time when it wasn't there. For me that time ended in 1997. For most of you, maybe a little earlier. But everybody who is reading this 2003 issue of *Asimov's* in the year 2003 was alive in the pre-Internet days. Most of you weren't around when the first atomic bombs were exploded, or when the first jet-powered commercial airliners went into service; a lot of you had not yet reached this planet back when television made the big shift from black and white to color; for some of you, even the founding of this very magazine back in 1977 lies in some prenatal and well-nigh prehistoric era. But all of you stand with one foot on either side of the great dividing line that separates the world without the Internet from the world we live in today.

I do remember my friend Sidney Coleman, the Harvard physics professor, saying to me—was it in 1990?—1992?— "There's a thing called the Internet; we use it to send physics papers back and forth, all around the world, instantly." It had something to do with computers being linked together across vast distances, he told me. I had a hard time visualizing how it worked. Eventually I discovered that use of this Internet thing wasn't limited to members of the international fraternity of research physicists; anyone with the proper computer connections could make use of it too. Then I began hearing the phrase, "World Wide Web." I started noticing odd little lines in advertisements that began with "www" and ended with ".com." And in the fullness of time, even as you and you and you did, I had the phone company install modem jacks in my house and got myself a shiny new computer equipped with the capacity to hook into the telephone system and signed on with an Internet Service Provider, and—well, you know how it goes—

My father was born in 1901. Automobiles were still uncommon on the streets. The telephone was still a novelty. Even electric lights were rarities, at least in people's own houses, though public buildings were being hooked up with them in his boyhood. Dirt roads, by and large, connected our towns and cities. The Wright Brothers' first flight was two years away. Marconi was tinkering with the gizmo that would, years later, become the radio. The world into which my father was born was profoundly and fundamentally different in almost every detail from the one we inhabit today. He lived on into the 1970s, and over the decades he saw his world change beyond all recognition as automobiles, airplanes, radio, and eventually television arrived, along with ball-point pens, Polaroid cameras, videocassette recorders, push-button telephones,

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home computers, pocket calculators, credit cards, contact lenses, freeways, automatic-transmission cars, and a million other formerly science fictional things. Of course, these changes came gradually—the Wright Brothers' first flight was not immediately followed by the construction of Kennedy Airport—and I wonder if he ever thought back to the gaslight era of his childhood and marveled at the transformations. I don't know. Perhaps he sometimes told himself that he had lived on into the glittering science fiction future about which his son had been writing all those stories, perhaps not. But I never asked him, and now, of course, it is much too late.

And here am I, now in the seventh decade of my life. I haven't seen quite as much change as my father did—we did, after all, have electric lights, paved highways, radios, and commercial air travel when I was a boy, hard as that may be for most of you to believe. There's been plenty of change in my lifetime, of course, but most of it has been of a quantitative rather than qualitative kind. Radio and television simply didn't exist at all when my father was young—they were concepts out of science fiction. (Even science fiction didn't exist, really, except in the novels of H.G. Wells. Hugo Gernsback started publishing some in his *Modern Electrics,* the world's first radio magazine, but that didn't begin until 1908.) My father was born into a world where there was no way that information—voices and pictures—could be transmitted over great distances through the air, and then it could, a well-nigh miraculous innovation. What I experienced, and there's a big difference here, were improvements in existing technology—the coming of FM transmission for radio, the replacement of blotchy black-and-white television sets with ones that provided pictures in plausible color. The same with air travel: the Boeing 777 is immensely more complex and powerful than the rickety thing the Wrights flew at Kitty Hawk, but it merely does the same task a great deal better. Before Kitty Hawk, the task couldn't be done at all.

That's the essential point here: some technological changes are just improvements, others are innately transformative. The dusty intercity highways of my father's boyhood weren't much different, conceptually, from the ones that Benjamin Franklin and George Washington used, or, for that matter, those of Greek and Roman times. Even the freeways that crisscross our nation today are just bigger and better versions of the roads of ancient times. Sure, the automobile, arriving early in the twentieth century, demanded paved roads, and the old dirt ones disappeared. So now I can and do drive from the San Francisco area to Los Angeles on a smooth, straight freeway in less than six hours, something that would have been unthinkable a century ago. Still, a road is a road is a road, and Interstate Five is merely a superior version of the dinky highways that linked the two halves of my state in President Hoover's day, and those, in turn, were only fancier versions of the unpaved roads of an earlier era. The only aspect of an atomic bomb that's different from earlier bombs (a significant one, I grant you) is the radioactivity; otherwise, it just provides a bigger and better bang. A push-button

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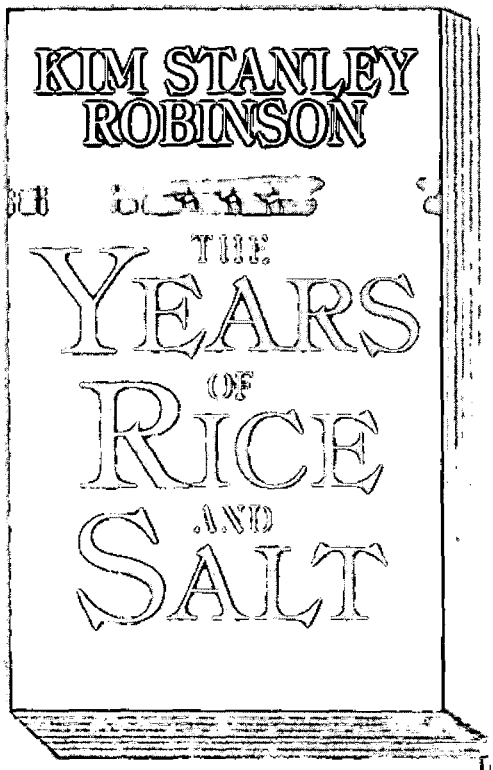

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phone is easier to use than the old dial phones, but it's still only a telephone. Et cetera, et cetera.

But now the Internet has come, bringing a qualitative change to society, and you and I were here to see it happen, even as my father was there to observe the debut of the radio, the airplane, and the family car. E-mail isn't simply a quicker and cheaper way of making telephone calls or sending letters; it's a whole revolution in communication. In pre-e-mail days we didn't routinely send messages off to China, South Africa, Australia, and Spain of a morning, as I did just the other day, and have replies come back by nightfall—all without cost. (We might have written letters to those places, but we wouldn't have had answers the same day, as I did in all four instances.) E-mail gives us virtually instantaneous contact with people all over the world, while imposing a form on those contacts that is quite different from earlier forms of communication. And the World Wide Web's near-infinity of links opens all knowledge to us in a manner that the best of libraries never could do, while also turning the world into a gigantic marketplace where goods of all sorts are instantly purchasable with a handful of clicks. Even the good old garage sale has been replaced by the immensely different eBay way of turning unwanted possessions into cash.

And also, spam—viruses—e-books—passwords—Google—

Yes, Google—a revolution all in itself, cunning software that instantaneously and effectively provides the master key to all knowledge: you can remember a time when Google wasn't there, can't you? I can. How did we ever live without it? Oh, but we did.

It's inevitable that we come to take miracles for granted, once they become part of daily life. Maybe there were days when my father looked back to the horse-and-buggy world of his childhood and felt as though he had somehow dropped through a fault in time, but I tend to doubt it. He adapted to the changes—most of them, anyway—as they came along, and after a time it must have seemed to him that things had always been that way. Just like everyone else, he had a radio, a telephone, a television set, an alarm clock, none of which existed when he was young. He spent the last twenty years of his life traveling far and wide on jet airliners. He would have had a car if he had had any need for one, but he lived in a city where owning one was more of a nuisance than a necessity. (Oddly, although he was an accountant, he never bothered to get a pocket calculator, and he died before the age of home computers.) Once in a while, maybe, he might have looked back at the vanished pre-technological world into which he had been born and felt a little shiver of disorientation, but he was too much of a down-to-earth man to have dwelled very often on the immensity of the changes he had seen.

And we'll be the same way. Which is, I think, a mistake. Far better, I think, for us who love to read stories about the fantastic future to wake up each day acknowledging that we have seen a big piece of that fantastic future come to life in our very own lives. We in particular need to keep bright in ourselves a sense of perspective on the relationship of the past and the

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future—that cosmic view of things that enabled Isaac Asimov's Hari Seldon to reshape the political structure of an entire galaxy in his famous "Foundation" epic. I believe it's important to maintain an awareness of the power and wondrousness of change, for those who fail to understand the meaning of change will be devoured by it; and for us there is no better way to acknowledge that power and that wondrousness than to remember that we, the generation of those who were alive and aware in the late 1990s, have lived through a very special change, a colossal transformation of our civilization.

What I'm doing here is "time-binding"—a term invented by Alfred Korzybski, the great semanticist of the last century, to describe what he saw as the distinguishing characteristic of Homo sapiens, the ability to establish continuity beyond the individual life span by keeping permanent records and transmitting them, preferably in written form, to later generations. I set these words down now to remind you of the transition society has just undergone, and to remind you of the magnitude of the change. Our civilization was altered forever by a spectacular technological innovation in our very own lifetimes, and it behooves us to be aware of that, to understand that we have passed through a transformation such as rarely comes in human history, and to contemplate the differences that that transformation has worked on the world into which we were born.

We who are now adults are the only ones who will be fully aware of what the Internet has wrought. Those who come after us will, and rightly so, take it all for granted. What, I wonder, will you say to your grandchildren, when you tell them that you grew up in the days before e-mail, and they look at you in disbelief? ○

BE REASONABLE, MAX, IF I DIDN'T WRITE TURGID, JARGON-CLOTTED PROSE, THE MENDACITY OF MY THEORY WOULD BE OBVIOUS!
WINNING AN ARGUMENT IS NO EXCUSE TO WRITE THAT BADLY!
02

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Sheila Williams

The 2003 ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD

Isaac Asimov Award winners and judges (from left to right): Sheila Williams, Bryn Neuenschwander, Rick Wilber, Thomas Seay, and Matthew Kirby.

Photo credit: Beth Gwinn

In October of 1992, I met Rick Wilber at the World Fantasy Convention in Pine Mountain, Georgia. Rick is a college professor and a science fiction writer whose stories have often appeared in *Asimov's*. At the convention, we hatched the idea of an award that would honor the legacy of Isaac Asimov and encourage the works of younger writers. Isaac, who had begun publishing science fiction stories when he was eighteen, had died that spring. When he was a young man, there were numerous magazines vying for short fiction. During the ten years that we worked together, he often mentioned that he had founded *Asimov Science Fiction* magazine so that talented writers who were just starting out would find the same kind of welcoming home for their stories that he had once found. Nowadays, there are far fewer fiction magazines, and Rick and I both felt that starting an award aimed at the works of younger writers would be a way to further Isaac's objective. The creation of

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this award, which came to be known by the extremely long name of The Isaac Asimov Award for Undergraduate Excellence in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing was announced ten years ago at the 1993 Conference on the Fantastic in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The award is co-sponsored by two organizations that strongly believe in promoting the works of early career writers, the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts and our own magazine. It is also supported by the School of Mass Communications at the University of South Florida. The judges for the award are Rick Wilber, Gardner Dozois, and me.

On Saturday, March 22, 2003, almost all of the finalists were in attendance at this year's awards banquet at the Conference on the Fantastic. Our winner, Bryn Neuenschwander, was a recent graduate from Harvard University where she majored in archeology and folklore. Bryn submitted a number of stories to this year's contest, and two of them were finalists. She received an expense-paid trip to the conference and a check for $500 for "Calling into Silence," and an Honorable Mention for "The Legend of Anahata."

Matthew Kirby, a student at Utah State University, was our first runner-up. He is majoring in history, has a minor in psychology, and plans to study for a masters degree in child psychology. He received a certificate and a two-year subscription to *Asimov's* for his story, "A Book of Revelation."

This year's second runner-up, Thomas Seay, was one of last year's finalists as well. Thomas is a senior at Georgia Tech who hopes to study with James Gunn at the University of Kansas next year. He received his award and a one-year complimentary subscription to *Asimov's* for his tale "Alone Again." In addition, he received an Honorable Mention for "Weathered Mountains."

We met Karina Sumner-Smith, an English major at York University in Toronto, Ontario, last year when she was a finalist for the award. Unfortunately, she could not be in attendance this year, but she received another Honorable Mention for "She Is Elizabeth Lynn Rhodea."

Authors at the conference included Brian Aldiss, Suzy McKee Charnas, John Clute, Charles De Lint, Nick DiChario, Stephen Donaldson, Kathleen Ann Goonan, Joe Haldeman, Elizabeth Hand, Alex Irvine, James Patrick Kelly, John Kessel, Daniel Keyes, David Lunde, Patricia McKillip, Peter Straub, and Tim Sullivan. One of the conference highlights always comes from the time these authors spend chatting informally with the Asimov Award finalists poolside at the conference hotel.

Last year's winning story by Lena DeTar, "Making Waves," is up on our website–*www.asimovs.com*.

Asimov's is proud to support these academic awards with IAFA. The International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts is a worldwide network of scholars, educators, writers, artists, filmmakers, critics, editors, publishers, and performers who share an interest in studying and celebrating the fantastic in all art forms, disciplines, and media.

We are actively looking for next year's winner. The deadline for submissions is December 15, 2003. All full-time undergraduate students at any accredited university

(Continued on page 74)

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On the Net

James Patrick Kelly

FREQUENT FILERS

1977

Ah, 1977! It was the year that **Star Wars** <*http://www.starwars.com*> first took us to a gal-axy far, far away and **Voyagers 1 and 2** <*http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov*> began their tour of the local system. The **Apple II** <*http://apple2history.org*> was perched at the cutting edge of technology. The **Yankees** <*www.Yankees.com*> won the World Series (yawn). **Jimmy Carter** <*http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.org*> was president, the queens of televison were **Laverne and Shirley** <*http://www.ksu.edu/english/janette/installations/Amanda/MAIN.HTM*>, and **disco** <*http://www.discomusic.com*> was the dance of choice.

It was also the year that *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* first saw the light of readers' eyes. I remember being tremendously excited at the arrival of *IAsfm,* as it was known back then, even though in 1977 I had one sorry publication to my name. I mean, I was so green that I hadn't even grown a *Patrick* yet; I was *James Kelly,* plain and simple. But the way I figured it, a new 'zine would want fresh young voices. And that would be me, right? I believed I could actually hear destiny calling. Alas, it was only the sound of rejection slips whistling by. Although I tried (and tried and tried), six years and two editors would come and go before I first appeared in these pages, even though I was selling regularly elsewhere. I mention this not so much to grind an ax as to point out to aspiring writers reading this a) that James Patrick Kelly was not built in a day—and neither will you be—and 2) that editors do not, in fact, share a group mind, so that what one rejects with a form letter may turn into another's cover story.

You can revisit the early days of *Asimov's* by clicking over to John O'Neill's excellent **A Brief History of Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine** <*http://www.sfsite.com/columns/asimov.htm*>. While you can't sample the styles of writing that held sway, you can compare the jpgs of eighties cover art with those of today. You know, even though it was corny, I kind of miss Isaac's face filling the "o" in *Asimov's.*

prolific

Why this plunge into nostalgia? You may recall that last time I introduced you to some of the newest *Asimov's* writers. I had intended to mention some of the writers who have appeared most frequently in these pages. But when I ran out of space, a new column was born.

Actually, I got the idea from **Jorge Candeias** <*http://www.terravista.pt/MeiaPraia/1466*> of

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Portimão, Portugal, who put the question of who had published most frequently in the magazine in the *Asimov's* Readers' Forum <*http://www.asimovs.com/discus*>. Several folks offered educated guesses but, at first, no one offered hard numbers. Those numbers were not easy to come by. I tried to figure them out myself by guessing at likely suspects and then looking them up in the **Internet Speculative Fiction DataBase** <*http://www.isfdb.org*>. But while the *isfdb* is a wonderful tool, it does not cross reference authors with magazines, nor is it infallible. I nearly went blind trying to cull Robert Silverberg's *Asimov's* contributions from the rest of his astonishing output. So I closed out of the *isfdb* and returned to the Readers' Forum for help. Savvy reader **Jason Hauser** <*http://www.geocities.com/j_sun123/*> of Raleigh, North Carolina, stepped forward with the welcome announcement that he had kept a database of *Asimov's* stories from the spring of 1977 to December 2002 and could tell me everything I wanted to know.

But before we count down the top ten, a few caveats. This snapshot will be seven months old by the time you view it. With one exception, the writers are all alive and busily typing. Thus rankings could change. Also, what I counted were the number of stories, not the number of words. Remember that both Robert Silverberg and Michael Swanwick have published entire *novels* in these pages. And I am not counting columns, reviews, or poems, although I will mention that if I *were* counting poems, **Bruce Boston** <*http://hometown.aol.com/bruboston/myhomepage/business.html*> would be the all time champ.

top ten

10. John M. Ford (Mike, to his pals) doesn't actually have an official website, but **Will Shetterly** <*http://www.player.org/pub/flash/people/will.html*> has written an admiring **An Introduction to John M. Ford** <*http://www.player.org/pub/flash/ford*>. Or else click over to Mike's **Strange Horizons Interview** <*http://www.strangehorizons.com/2002/20020429/interview.shtml*> of last year. Mike was a frequent contributor from 1978 through 1990, but his short story production fell off in the nineties. His most recent novel is the 2001 fantasy, *The Last Hot Time.*

9. Lucius Shepard is another writer without an official website, although why this brilliant writer hasn't picked up a single fan website is beyond me. While Lucius was arguably the hottest writer in science fiction during the eighties, in an excerpt from his 2001 **Locus Interview** *http://www.locusmag.com/2001/Issue11/Shepard.html*, Lucius frankly admits, "I had a 'career pause' from '93 to about a year and a half ago—Nick Gevers came up with that description, and I thought it was very genteel." A must click for Shepard fans is **Exclusive Movie Reviews by Lucius Shepard or, The Fall of Civilization by Way of Pop Culture** <*http://www.electricstory.com/reviews/lsreviews.asp*>, wherein Lucius offers his often outrageous opinions on the state of modern cinema. Tom Cruise fans are advised to wear body armor.

8. Early in her career **Mary Rosenblum** <*http://www.sff.net/people/MaryRosenblum*>, hit the genre running. From 1990-98 she published over two dozen stories in

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Asimov's, alone or in collaboration. Then she stopped writing SF and started writing the Rachel O'Conner mysteries as Mary Freeman. About the same time, she stopped updating her website. But be of good cheer, Rosenblum fans. Mary is returning to *Asimov's* after too long an absence and vows to update her site by the time you read this. In the meantime, check out one of her other projects, the **Long Ridge Writers Group** <*http://www.longridgewritersgroup.com*>, "a program that has, for thirty years, taught thousands of aspiring authors how to find their own writing niche."

7. Connie Willis doesn't have an official page, there is a fan page about her: **The Connie Willis Homepage** <*http://www.geocities.com/Wellesley/5595/willis/willis.html*>. It is, alas, sadly dated as of this writing. Connie has been widely interviewed online: at **Cybling** <*http://www.cybling.com/artists/awillis.html*>, twice at **Scifi.com** <*http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue17/interview.html*> and <*http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue211/interview.html*> and **The Zone** <*http://www.zone-sf.com/conniewillis.html*>. Possibly the oddest bit of Willisiana on the web is the **Connie Willis trading card** <*http://www.chicon.org/chi2000/card03.htm*> issued by **Chicon** <*http://www.chicon.org*>, the 2000 Worldcon. Or else it's **Puzzling Connie Willis** <*http://www.nesfa.org/boskone/b36/b36pb/puzzlingconniewillis.htm*>.

6. **Robert Silverberg's Quasi-Official Home Page** <*http://www.owmyhead.com/silverberg/oldsite/silvhome.htm*> is a fitting tribute to a career without parallel in the genre. The site is maintained by Jon Davis and, as Bob writes on the home page, "I may be present as a guiding figure in the background, but he and he alone will decide what is to be included." This is not the only fan page devoted to Bob's work. I was amazed to find sites in French, **Robert Silverberg** <*http://www.cafardcosmique.com/auteur/silverberg.html*>, Italian **Robert Silverberg** <*http://www.intercom.publinet.it/silverberg.htm*> and Greek **Silverberg Robert** <*http://www.altfactor.gr/cgi-bin/websf.cgi?silverbe*> among **Google's** <*www.google.com*> top ten hits for Bob.

5. **Michael Swanwick Online** <*http://www.michaelswanwick.com*> is a collaboration among Michael; Vlatko Juric-Kokic of Zagreb, Croatia; Keith Brooke of Brightlingsea, England; Peter Tillman of Tucson, Arizona; and Nicholas Gevers of Cape Town, South Africa. You may remember that from the column I wrote a year ago entitled "Michael Swanwick By James Patrick Kelly." It's clear that Michael cares about this site and spends time keeping it up to date. Well worth a click are *The Squalid Truth* and *Unca Mike's Advice,* where his deeply subversive wit is on display. The site is *the* gateway to the multitudes of free Swanwick stories. He may have more free fiction on the net than any other professional SF writer I know.

4. **Nancy Kress's** <*http://www.sff.net/people/nankress*> official site is a model of biographical and bibliographical information. Aside from being one of our best writers, Nancy is also one of our best writing *teachers,* and here she offers advice to aspiring writers as well. There are many other Nancy resources on the web, although one of my favorites is the **Transcription of the Speech** <*http://www.*

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lysator.liu.se/lsff/mb-nr21/Speech_by_Nancy_Kress.html> she gave at Confuse93 on the subject of "Women in American Science Fiction." Don't forget to check out the **Science Fiction Weekly Interview** <*http://www.scifi.com/sfw/issue279/interview.html*> she gave last summer.

3. Well, if you must know, it's **Me** <*http://www.jimkelly.net*>. But this column is already way too Kelly-centric, so let's just move along, okay?

2. Robert Reed is my nominee for the most under-rated writer in SF. Year after year he graces these pages with wonderful stories and yet he has yet to win a major award. Pay attention to this man! Although Bob does not have his own website, **Star Base Andromeda** <*http://www.starbaseandromeda.com*>, Lincoln Nebraska's longest running science fiction, fantasy, and horror club, has just put up a site honoring their local hero at **Robert Reed** <*http://www.starbaseandromeda.com/reed.html*>. You can read Bob's own words by clicking the excerpt from his **Locus Interview** <*http://www.locusmag.com/1998/Issues/04/Reed.html*>.

1. **Isaac Asimov** <*http://www.asimovonline.com*> published forty-seven stories in the magazine that bore his name, ten more at this writing than runner-up Robert Reed. I commended Edward Seiler's comprehensive fan site to you in one of the first columns and it continues to be the best starting point for exploring Isaac's prodigious output. It's not surprising that there are many, many sites devoted to the Good Doctor on the net. One of the most ambitious is **Jenkins' Spoiler-Laden Guide to Isaac Asimov** <*http://homepage.mac.com/jenkins/Asimov/Asimov.html*>. John H. Jenkins is reviewing all of Isaac's book and short fiction. He writes "I don't consider my position as an Asimov fan to obligate me to like his poorer work. On the other hand, there's an awful lot by Asimov which I really, really like—which is why I'm an Asimov fan in the first place."

exit

Limiting my list to the top ten meant that I had no time to take a look at some of *Asimov's* other top writers, people like **Steven Utley** <*http://www.scifi.com/scifiction/originals/originals_archive/utley/utley_bio.html*>, **Brian Stableford** <*http://freespace.virgin.net/diri.gini/brian.htm*>, **Mike Resnick** <*http://www.fortunecity.com/tattooine/farmer/2*>, **Tony Daniel** <*http://www.cyberonic.net/~danne1/tonydaniel/index.htm*> and **Jack McDevitt** <*http://www.sfwa.org/members/McDevitt*>—the eleventh through fifteenth most prolific contributors. No slight was intended.

If there is anything to be learned from this exercise, it is perhaps how difficult it is to sustain a career as a short story writer. Most of the folks on this list are (or were, in Isaac's case) accomplished and successful novelists. Yet they returned again and again to the short form. It was not—believe me—for the money. Nor is there great fame to be won in these pages, more's the pity. So why did they do it?

I won't presume to speak for my colleagues, but it says here that even though the short story has been pushed to the economic margins of science fiction, it still remains very close to the artistic center of our genre. ❍

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UNDER THE LUNCHBOX TREE

John Kessel

"Under the Lunchbox Tree" is the third in a series of stories John Kessel is writing set in the lunar Society of Cousins; one of the previous tales, "Stories for Men," was published in our October/November 2003 issue. He hopes to see all of the stories eventually come together into a book. Mr. Kessel's most recent fiction has appeared in the online magazine Infinite Matrix and in the special "New Wave Fabulists" issue of the literary magazine *Conjunctions.* During a recovery from recent eye surgery, he took up piano lessons with his daughter Emma, and can now "play a version of 'The Entertainer' that is almost recognizable as music." His website is *http://www4.ncsu.edu/~tenshi.*

On Monday, they started the godawful retreat olympics with track and field at the biodrome, and Mira placed last in the broad jump, and that was it: she vowed she would be out of there by the end of the week. The infirmary was Plan A, and wasn't working.

She sat on the examining table, her feet dangling half a meter off the floor, trying to look sick. The infirmary was only two rooms, an office and a treatment room that contained a few cabinets and an examination table with a multi-scanner hovering over it like a big preying mantis. The scanner's boom was an off-white that Mira decided must have been designed to reassure patients when it was new twenty years ago. The color reminded her of spoiled milk. One wall was tuned to a pix of a tropical paradise, probably Hawaii or the Philippines, if she knew her Earth landscapes: a cone-shaped improbably green volcano in the distance hovered over an improbably green field, bordered by a white fence, where horses stood about cropping grass or poised swag-bellied and sleepy-eyed with

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their heads down, their sweet faces thinking horsy thoughts, twitching a shoulder or haunch now and then to dislodge a fly. Even the horses did not improve Mira's state of mind.

"I don't see any sign of an infection," the nurse called from the other room. She came into the examining room and laid the diagnostic window down beside Mira on the table. "You see?"

The bar charts were all in the green.

"I still don't feel good," Mira insisted. "My stomach hurts."

"There are no indications." The nurse was a pale matron wannabe with a ratty haircut.

"Maybe I'm feeling a little better." Mira admitted. "I guess I'll just go back to my group."

"Do you need me to take you?" the nurse asked in a way that made it entirely clear that the last thing she fancied was minding some malingering twelve-year-old for a moment longer than she had to.

"I'll be fine," Mira said. She hopped off the table. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." The nurse retreated to the office. As Mira left the clinic she grabbed the diagnostic window, thumbed its release, crumpled it and shoved it into her pocket.

She fled the clinic down the corridor. She acted as if she was going back to the playing fields that took up half of the volcanic bubble that contained Camp Swampy. But when she came to the archway that opened out onto the green fields and the great overarching white roof, she hurried past it toward the experimental forest habitat, trying to come up with Plan B.

As she skipped along the hall, she sang:

"My spacesuit has three holes in it.
My suit it has three holes.
If it didn't have three holes in it,
It wouldn't be my suit.

One hole for my head,
One hole used in bed,
The other hole means
Holy beans!
I'm dead!"

Past the sauna, she veered left to the greenhouse. Beyond the semipermeable barrier, the air was humid and the thick-leafed trees towered over the paths. Bright sunlight from the heliotropes in the roof filtered down through their branches. She heard the buzz of insects and the chirp of birds.

The thing she hated about retreat was the phony sisterhood. It wasn't that Mira didn't like some of the girls who were crammed into the dormitory for two weeks—Kara and Rita were even her friends—it was that you were supposed to pretend that you had some mystical connection to girls you wouldn't be caught dead starting a family with.

Along the path, she found a lunchbox tree. The boxes nearest the trunk

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were small and green, but the ones farthest out and high up, on the big limbs, were square and white and ripe. Mira leaped up a couple of meters or more and managed to snatch one. She landed clumsily, cradling the box in her lap. Raised letters on the celluloid read "LUNCH": she pulled the top open. Inside were a sandwich, a cookie, a bladder of lemonade, and an apple. She broke the peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich from its stem and took a bite. As she ate, she dug Comet out of her pocket. She turned him over in her fingers and ran her thumbnail along his frozen black mane.

Like Veronica—it was Veronica's trick at retreat to put on a big show of sisterhood, when back in the colony she was the biggest backstabber in school. She gave away secrets and told lies. When Mira had revealed her plans to get a horse, Veronica had blabbed it to everyone in the school, to the point where Mira could hardly show her face for a month.

Mira had more in common with her brother Marco than she would ever have with Veronica. But the counselors acted like you couldn't have that connection with a boy. What they taught was against human nature. At least it was against Mira's. She liked boys. If a boy had a problem with you, he would tell you. If he liked or didn't like someone, he couldn't hide it. He didn't pretend to be your pal and then dirk you when you weren't around—or if he did try that, he wasn't any good at it. But in sharing circle, Mira had to keep such thoughts to herself, or they would accuse her of gender dysphoria.

And absolutely worst of all, retreat was boring.

Mira broke the lemonade bladder away from the side of the lunchbox and sucked on its stem. The lemonade was a little sour, but good.

She tucked Comet into one pocket and pulled the diagnostic window out of the other. She laid it flat, tugged the top corners to turn it rigid. It was a single sheet display with a retractable pipette along the edge for taking blood samples.

She played with the controls. She took the pipette and stuck it into the lemonade bladder; after a moment, she stuck it into the ground next to her.

The temperature display went into the orange. The blood readouts turned various shades of red. Mira blew into the pipette and reattached it to the side of the window. She took a bite of her apple.

"What are you doing here?"

Startled, Mira looked up. It was a man. She didn't think there were any men at Camp Swampy.

The man wore green coveralls and carried a caddy with spray bottles and plastic gloves. "You retreat girls aren't supposed to come into the greenhouse. We got a lot of experiments going in here."

Mira bowed her head. "I'm sorry," she said.

"You oughtn't to be taking lunches from the trees."

Mira blinked hard a couple of times and was gratified to generate a couple of tears. Eyes brimming, she looked up at the man. He was little, with white hair thinning on top, long enough on the sides to be pulled back and tied in a knot at the back of his neck. He had a round face and no chin. His eyes were innocent blue.

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He saw her tears, and his tone changed. He put down the caddy. "What's the matter?"

"My—my mother," Mira said. She pointed to the diagnostic window. "She's dying."

"What?" He glanced at the window's readouts. "Where'd you get this?"

"The director called me down to the clinic. They didn't say what it was about, and when I got there, the nurse—the nurse—" Mira threw a little quaver into her voice, "—she said mother had caught a retrovirus from the Aristarchans. They said she was under quarantine. I could only see her by remote, and they gave me this. They said it wouldn't do any good for me to go back home, I wouldn't be able to see her. So they're making me stay here for the rest of the retreat."

"No."

"Yes. And I couldn't go back to the meetings, so I ran away and hid in here. And I got hungry, and—"

The man knelt down next to her, stroked her hair. "It's okay, girl. I get it."

"I can't go back to the retreat."

"There's really nothing else for you to do. Maybe if you ask the director."

"She's the one who says I have to stay here!"

"I don't know what to say."

"Can't you take me home?"

"Oh, no. I couldn't."

"Do you know where there's a rover?"

"Well—"

"You must, if you work around here. Please, will you take me home? Please?"

"Sweetheart, that's not for me to decide. I'm just a tech."

Mira started to cry in earnest. It was almost as if her mother really were sick and dying. She imagined her, instead of being on vacation with Richard, floating in a tank of milky fluid being worked over desperately by nanomachines. Tiny telltales would wink red and green on monitors in the silent, dusky room. "*Please,*" she whispered.

The man sat back on his haunches and was quiet for a moment. Mira turned off the diagnostic and crumpled it—no use leaving it open for him to examine and think about. He would have to be pretty simple to buy her story anyway. She looked at the ground and cried some more.

At last, the man said, "Do you have a suit? Can you get it?"

"Yes," Mira said, looking into his guileless eyes.

"Okay. Meet me at the service airlock in twenty minutes; I think I can get one of the rovers. But I really think you should talk to the director again."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! You don't know how much this means to me."

"What's your name?"

"Mira. What's yours?"

"Theodore Dorasson. People call me Teddy."

"Thank you, Teddy. You're so kind. I promise, you won't regret it."

"Can't regret a good deed."

* * *

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Mira went back to the athletic fields. She circled the edge of the track, past the multiple bars where the gymnastics nerds were showing off their acrobatics, toward the locker room. Kara and Rita were in line by the high jump pit, Rita talking away as usual and Kara standing with one hip thrust out, her hand on it. Kara saw Mira and her gaze moved a centimeter to follow her, but Mira shook her head and Kara turned back. Rita didn't even notice. Mira ran the gauntlet of the counselors without getting called.

Until she reached the locker room, where Counselor Leanne stopped her. "What are you doing in here?"

"Counselor Betty told me to change into my running shoes. She said I can't get out of it any longer."

"Okay, then. Hurry up." Leanne went out to the track.

They were supposed to go on a surface hike the next afternoon and had already been assigned skinsuits. Mira pulled hers from her locker, bundled it into a tote bag, tucked the helmet under her arm and snuck out the back door of the locker room. She tried to look as if she was in complete control, but she had a bright orange helmet in her arms, her heart was racing like a bird's, and if anyone had tried to stop her she would have collapsed on the spot.

She left the dorm section and went down a level to the substructure. Down a hallway past rooms for environment systems, HVAC, storage, and power, Mira followed signs toward the maintenance airlocks.

She turned a corner and almost ran into Teddy. He grabbed her shoulder and put a finger to his lips. Teddy already wore a skinsuit, yellow with silver reflective stripes along the legs and arms. He held his helmet under his arm and looked up and down the corridor. He looked like he should have a caption over his head labeled, "I am breaking the rules—please stop me."

"Follow me," he whispered, and led her down a side way to a door marked "No Admittance." He unlocked it and hustled Mira inside. They were in a room that smelled of ozone, full of keening pipes. "Put your suit on," Teddy said.

He made no move to give her privacy. As if she'd ever consider sleeping with him! But still, aware of his presence, Mira stripped to her briefs and pulled on the boots, then rolled the suit up her legs and onto her belly. The fabric closed itself over her, tight as skin. She shrugged into the sleeves. The web of thermoregulators adjusted itself over her, squirming as if alive. She was transferring the contents of her pockets to the suit's belt pouch when Teddy touched her arm. She jumped.

"I'm just checking your suit's power," Teddy said. He pointed at her forearm readouts. "Do you have a fresh heat sink?"

"It's okay," she said.

He handed her the helmet. "Let's go."

They passed down an aisle between machines and came out through a door in the back of the garage. Teddy led her along a row of crawlers and they climbed into the cab of a small surface rover.

He sealed the cab door. "Get down on the floor. Don't put on your helmet; we'll go shirtsleeves. But keep it next to you."

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Mira curled into a ball on the floor and felt the slight vibration as Teddy started the rover's engine. The vehicle lurched forward, turned once, twice, then paused. Teddy hit some switches, and from outside she heard the rumble of a cargo airlock door opening. The rover moved forward again, stopped, the door closed behind them, and the air cycled.

Mira looked up at Teddy behind the rover's controls. He stared intently ahead. She could not guess what he was thinking. Teddy had to be on Minimum Living Standard, a voting man working the mita. A man this old working the mita was a nobody. If he had even a scrap of talent or ambition, he could be an artist, a musician, a scientist. Instead he lived in a dorm and did scutwork.

Or else he had some tragic story in his past. Mira wondered what it could be. His wife had been killed in an accident. Or his mate had used him as a boytoy, and once he lost his youth and looks she let him go. Though by the look of him, he didn't seem like someone who would ever have made a boytoy.

Ten minutes later, Mira felt a bump through the rover's floor as the outer airlock door opened. This time there was no sound. Teddy set the rover in drive and, as simple as that, they were out.

"Okay, you can get up now," he said. "Strap yourself in."

Teddy steered the rover through the radiation maze outside the airlock. The harsh lights of the maze made Mira squint. Near the end, the amount of dust on the concrete increased, and then, suddenly, they were out on the surface.

It was mid-afternoon, not much different from when Mira had arrived at camp three days earlier. The sun blasted down, blotting out the contours of the landscape. They were on a ridge, with low hills in the distance, ejecta from the impacts that formed the craters to the north, including the colony's. The dust over the regolith was torn up here with rover tracks and bootprints. The road was a simple graded path four meters wide running straight north until it snaked off into the hills at the short horizon.

"Relax," Teddy said. "Two hours and you'll be home." He handed Mira a squeeze bottle of water. "Some music?" He touched a control on the panel and the sound of a piano throbbed from the speakers. The music was furious and dark.

"What is this?"

"Alkan. A French composer, back on Earth."

"I don't like it."

"Give it a try. A girl should try new things."

Two hours was much longer than it had taken her to get to retreat on the cable train. What would happen when the counselors found she had escaped?

"I'm sure your mother is going to be all right," Teddy said. He had switched to automatic and let the rover drive itself.

"I guess."

"They should let you into the hospital when you get back. They won't care they told you don't come."

"How can you be so sure?"

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"You're her girl. You love her."

Mira reminded herself of the image she had created of her mother in the nanorepair tank. She made it real in her mind. Richard was there, and Marco, watching from behind a window. The technicians were helpful and efficient. Marco wore the video tats their mother had given him on Founder's Day. Richard wore black, as usual.

"What does your mother do?"

"She's a plant geneticist. She invented the lunchbox tree."

"No."

"Really. That's why I went there when I found out she was sick. It made me feel like I was close to her."

She must be on one of the teams of geneticists."

"She works alone. That's why they sent her to Aristarchus. They're having some kind of breakdown in the ecosystem there, and she was hired to fix it."

"Seems I might have heard of that."

Mira reached into her belt pouch and pulled out Comet. "Look at this," she said.

"What is that? Is it a horse?"

"While she was there, mother was going to arrange to get me a horse from Earth. I'm going to be the only girl on the moon to have a horse." It was the first true thing she had told Teddy. "At least I *was,*" she added, trying to get a little crack into her voice. She thought it sounded pretty good.

Teddy must have thought so too. "Now, don't you think about that right now. Think about good thoughts. Have you ever seen a horse?"

"I've ridden one—in VR." She had downloaded the program, "Beginning Horsemanship," from the library.

"What will you do when you get your horse?"

"I'll train him to jump! I'll school him down on the floor of Fowler, in Sobieski Park. We can get permission for a stable in the tower basement. Back on Earth, they even have horses in cities! It'll probably be hard for him to get used to low-G at first. I'll feed him the same fodder they give the sheep and pigs. I'll brush him every night, and pick his hooves. I'll braid his mane. I'll clean up after him—we can recycle his wastes. I won't let anyone else touch him, except maybe Marco. Can you imagine how high he'll be able to jump up here? I'll bet we'll clear the fountains in Sobieski without even getting wet! He's going to be named Comet."

"Sounds good. Sounds like you got it all planned."

The piano music rumbled on. Though trouble might be coming, with Teddy looking like a chinless baby it was all Mira could do to keep from busting out laughing.

It got hot in the cab. The rover already smelled sour, and Mira caught a strong whiff of Teddy's sweat. They had reached the crest of Adil's Ridge, and the road began a series of switchbacks descending to the plain. At the hairpin turns, the dropoffs were 100 meters or more. Between breaks in the hills, she could see, ahead of them, glittering fields of solar collectors, and in the distance a glimpse of the domed crater that was home.

Though the rover's brain, running off the LPS network, was quite ade-

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quate to negotiate the twisting road, Teddy hovered over the controls. A damp strand of hair had come undone from his ponytail and hung by his cheek.

A red light started blinking on the control panel. The piano music stopped and a voice began: "This is a constabulary alert. A child—"

Teddy touched a key on the board and the voice snuffed out, replaced again by the piano. Neither of them said anything.

After a while, Mira said, "I don't care for this music. It's crippled. How come you like it?"

"There's a piano in the warren," Teddy said. "I play it sometimes."

"Are you any good?"

"I could never play any Alkan. On a good day, I can play a slow rag with only a couple of mistakes."

"You live in the warren?"

"Yes."

"Don't you have any family?"

"My mother died a long time ago. I lived with my Aunt Sophie for a while. I've never been married."

"How old are you?"

"I'm sixty."

Mira pulled her feet up onto the seat and hugged her knees. "What a waste," she muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing. What happens to you when they find out you took this rover?"

"I can explain the situation. You'll tell them about your mother. They'll go easy once they hear that."

"You think so? They told me not to come home. I was in retreat."

"Some things are more important than retreat. Your director will understand, once she thinks about it."

"But if they don't understand—what will you do?"

"I suppose they'll bust me back to the rack farms. Collar me, and put me on probation. I've worked there before. It's not so bad. All the fresh tomatoes you can eat."

The more Mira thought about it, the more miserable she felt.

"But it won't come to that, Mira," Teddy said. "You've got to have more faith in the good will of the matrons."

They were down on the plain now, running straight as an arrow between fields of solar collectors toward the colony. Machines moved through the fields, removing dust from the faces of the collectors. It wouldn't be long now.

"I lied," Mira said. "My mother isn't sick."

Teddy looked at her. His blue eyes were wide and clear. His ears poked out sideways and his lips were pursed. He looked like a clown.

"That medical display. What about—"

"Don't be such an idiot, Teddy!"

He turned back to the road and gripped the wheel.

"You tricked me," he said quietly, and after a moment, staring straight ahead out the window, "You're not the first. Probably won't be the last."

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Mira didn't say that they would probably think he had abducted her. It was the blackest crime the Society of Cousins could imagine; they would shove him into the stereotype of their worst nightmares, probably already had. She could save herself a lot of trouble by simply going along with that story.

Teddy was silent the rest of the way. The rimwall rose before them; at its base shone the lights of the south airlock. Another rover sped out to meet them; a couple of figures in surface suits who were riding on its back hopped off and skipped along beside Teddy's rover. Mira saw the constable's insignia on their shoulders. They pointed forcefully at the airlock entrance. Teddy nodded and waved at them.

Through the maze and into the open vehicle airlock they went. The other rover followed them in. More constables piled out. The constables stood impatiently on both sides of Teddy's rover while air was pumped into the lock. The one on Mira's side was a woman, and the three on Teddy's were two women and a man. The minute pressure was equalized, they yanked the rover's doors open.

"Don't hurt him!" Mira yelled, but they had already seized Teddy by the collar and dragged him out onto the floor.

At the constabulary headquarters, they questioned Mira and Teddy in different rooms. Mira told the truth, but they did not want to believe it.

Then eventually they seemed to believe it. Next came the scolding from Mira's mother. The constables reached her at Tranquility Spa, and, after explaining the situation, turned Mira over to her. The screen seemed huge. Her mother was wearing a fancy low-cut blouse Mira had never seen before. Mira tried not to look her in the eyes. "How can I trust you?" her mother kept saying. "You're supposed to be an adult in a year and a half!" She and Richard were cutting short their vacation and would be home in another day.

Mira kept asking the constables what they were going to do with Teddy, but they wouldn't tell her. She insisted that they let her see him. Instead, they put a collar on Mira and took her home.

At least the constable who dropped her off let her go in alone. It was 0130 when she opened the door to the apartment, and almost tripped stepping in.

Marco had taken all of her horses off the shelf and set them out on the floor. There was a whole herd of them, bays and blacks and pintos and palominos, some prancing with foreleg raised and neck arched, others ears laid back in full gallop, others rearing with nostrils flared, others standing square on four legs, others with heads bent to crop the green fabric floor. There were mares and foals, yearlings and ponies, stallions with little bumps between their hind legs to indicate they were boys. Some were twenty centimeters tall, others so tiny Mira could hide them in the palm of her hand.

Marco lay on the floor next to them, fully dressed, asleep with his head on his arm. Mira tiptoed through the field of horses and crouched down beside him. The sidewise shadows of the horses, cast by the nightlight, fell on his face. When she touched his shoulder, he stirred. His eyelids

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fluttered and he blinked them open. It took him a moment to realize who she was.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked.

He rubbed his eyes and sat up. A crease ran across his cheek from where he had been lying on the sleeve of his shirt. "The constables called looking for Mom. They said you would be sent home. What happened?"

"I'll tell you in the morning." She helped him get up and steered him, half asleep, toward his bedroom. She managed to get him into his bed, then sat down on the edge.

"Are you in trouble?" he asked.

"I'll just tell Mom it's your fault." She poked him in the side. "That usually works."

"Ha. Ha." he said, eyelids drooping. "Mom's onto that one."

He let out a big sigh and his eyes fell shut.

"Thanks for setting out the welcoming committee," Mira said.

" 'Knew you'd need to see some friendly faces," Marco whispered. His breathing became regular and he fell asleep.

Mira went back into the living room and began to gather up the horses and return them to her room. It wouldn't do for their mother to come home and find them all over the floor. As she worked, she wondered, for the first time, how Marco spent the nights when everyone else was away. She had imagined it as a great freedom, one of the many privileges boys had over girls. Boys didn't get sent to retreats. Marco could hang out at the Men's House, stay up as late as he liked, meet with friends, and pull pranks all night.

But what if he just stayed home alone? That would get old fast. It would feel as if nobody cared about you enough to pay attention.

Mira realized that being left alone wasn't always a privilege. Teddy was left alone. He was invisible. Mira didn't want Marco to end up invisible. Marco was her if she had been born a boy—their mother had them grown from the same germ cells, with Mira's X chromosome switched to a Y the only difference between them.

When Mira had arranged the last of the horses on her shelves, she took Comet out of her pocket and set him in front. The little horse stared back at her, his long noble face intelligent and alert. She knew she would never really have a horse; horses didn't make any sense on the moon.

She went back out to the living room and sat in a chair, waiting for their mother to come home. O

—for Emma Hall Kessel

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HEXAGONS

Robert Reed

The American publication of *Sister Alice,* a novel based on a series of stories the author published in *Asimov's,* will be out from Tor in the fall. Mr. Reed is currently working on a sequel to another novel, *Marrow.* He tells us that "Hexagons" comes, in part, from his childhood. "My father ran for a seat on the state legislature. My brother and I were carted around like trophies, and we hated it. I was secretly glad when Dad lost in the primary."

My mother always made a lot of noise about keeping busy, and how much she hated tripping over kids who were doing nothing but reading books or watching the electric vase. That's why my brother and I belonged to the biggest, most important swim team in our little end of the world. It was to keep us fit and keep us from being underfoot. Chester was one of the stars on the team. I wasn't. Nobody ever explained how I got accepted into those lofty ranks. But if I know my mom, she told the coach, "Fair is fair. And if you want one of my boys, you've got to take both of them." Mom loved to talk about things like fair play and decency, but mostly, it was just awfully convenient having the two of us involved in the same sport. It meant less driving, and fewer events to attend. Which is a kind of fairness, I suppose—making life easy on your folks.

I wasn't an awful swimmer. In a flat-out race, Chester and I were pretty much equal. Pretty much. But my brother happened to be four years younger than me—four years and seven months, to be exact—which made him one of the top seven-year-olds in the province. And made me his big-assed sidekick. Our coach was pretty plain about his own affections. He'd stalk the sides of the bath, hollering instructions down at poor Chester. Elbows, legs, breathing, and then back to the elbows again. Swimming is a ferociously technical business. It demands a muscular grace that I've never been able to maintain. Occasionally the coach would check on me, making sure I wasn't dead in the deep end. But in general, my value with the team was more of a spiritual order: I made the other twelve-year-olds feel good about their abilities. Lapping me was a great game. Boys and girls could play that game all night. You can see why I didn't exactly adore the sport. But it wasn't that awful, either. I got to stare at girls wearing tight wet silks. That's always a benefit. And since nobody expected any-

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thing from me, I was free to cling to the side for minutes at a stretch, watching the girls and listening to the coach roaring at my brother. "Pull through the water! Through, Chester! Down the middle of your body. And bring your hand out this way. This way! With your elbow up . . . oh, Christ . . . what in hell is that. . . ?"

I don't remember that night's workout. And I don't have any special recollections of getting dressed in the locker room afterward. We always took showers, but I never got rid of the chlorine smell. The stuff clung to my hair, and if my goggles leaked—and they usually did—my eyes would burn for hours. Then we'd put our school uniforms back on again, and I always had to make sure that Chester remembered his silk trunks and goggles. I assume all those usual things happened that night. But what I do remember, without question, was that our father was supposed to pick us up. That gave the evening a dramatic kick. In our lives, Dad was something of a wild card. You could never guess where he was or what was so important, but his busy life had its way of dividing his allegiances, spreading him thin. I can't count the nights when it was Chester and me sitting on the steps of the Young Legionnaires' Club, waiting for that old green Testudo to pull up.

That night was different, however. The old man surprised us. Not only was he waiting at the locker door, he'd actually seen the last few minutes of the workout. "You looked strong out there," he told Chester, rubbing at his stubbly hair. Then to me, with a pushed-along concern, he asked, "Are you hurt? I saw you doing a lot of standing in the shallow end."

I could have lied. I could have told him, "Yeah, I had a cramp." I should have made up a great story, my twisting, pain-wracked body sinking to the bottom and half a dozen girls in wet silks fighting for the honor of pulling me up again. But instead, I just shrugged and told him, "No, I wasn't hurt."

"Then what were you doing?"

"Standing," I said. And I left it there.

Our father wasn't a big man, or small. There was a time in life when he seemed wondrously powerful—a titan capable of casting shadows and flinging snowballs clear over our house. But at the wise age of twelve, I was realizing that shadows were easy and our house wasn't all that big. And everything about my father was beginning to diminish. He had a fondness for overcoats that were too large for him. He was a smiling man. A salesman by trade and by temperament, he had a smiling voice and an easy charm and the sort of rough, unspectacular looks that helped people believe whatever he was trying to sell them. We might have been rich, if Dad had just stuck to selling. But he had this dangerous streak of imagination. Every few years, he'd start up some new business. Each venture began with hope and considerable energy, and each lasted for a year or maybe eighteen months. At some point, we'd stop hearing about his new career. Dad would stay away from home, at least past dinnertime. Toward the end, he couldn't make it back until midnight, and I would lie in bed, wrestling with my brain, trying desperately to make myself sleep before Mom had the chance to corner him and the shouting began.

That night was a winter night. Windy and bitter. With Dad leading the

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charge, we stepped out into the cold dark air, our breath smoky and my wet hair starting to freeze. The old Testudo, big and square, was parked under a light. Hadrian was sitting in the back, in his straw, watching for us. I liked that cat, but he worried me. He liked to nip fingers. My fingers, mostly. All those generations of careful breeding and the fancy Asian splicing, but really, cheetahs are still as wild as they are tame. And while I thought it was neat to have a cheetah, Mom held a rather different opinion. "Do you know why your father bought him?" she asked me once. "Because he's going bald."

"The cat is?" I asked.

"No, your father is," she rumbled. Which, frankly, made no more sense to me than the cat going bald.

I climbed into the back seat, just so I could stick one of my least favorite fingers through the wire mesh, that dog-like face greeting me with a rough lick and a quick pinch of incisors. Chester was sitting up front with Dad. Dad cranked the motor, and it came on and then died again. He tried again, and there was a roar and cough and silence again. That was my father's life with machines. He decided the motor had flooded, and so he turned on the ceiling light and waited. He smiled back at me, or at his cat. I could never feel sure which of us was getting the smile. Then with an odd, important voice, he said, "I want to show you something."

I said, "Okay."

He reached inside his big overcoat, pulling out a folded-up newspaper. It was already turned to page two. One tiny article was circled. "Read it," he advised, handing the paper back to me. And even before I could start, he asked, "What do you think?"

I saw my father's name.

"Leonard Dunlop, 38, has filed as a candidate for Senate in District 8," I read. Then I held the article up to the weak light, eyes blinking from the chlorine, little tears giving every word a mushy, dreamy look. "If he wins," I read, "Mr. Dunlop intends to use his salary to help pay for his children's university education."

Again, Dad asked, "What do you think?"

"You're running for what?" I asked, using an unfortunate tone. A doubting tone.

"The Senate," he said, pointing proudly at the tiny article.

"The big one?" Chester asked. "In New Rome?"

I snorted. Twelve years old and not particularly wise in the ways of politics, but I still had enough sense to dismiss that possibility. "He means the little senate. For our province, that's all."

Which wasn't the best way to phrase things.

Dad gave me a look. Then he turned forward and started the car, listening to the ugly engine cough and die. Then he turned to Chester, telling him, "But this is just the beginning."

With his salesman's voice, he sounded convinced, saying, "This is an important district. If we win, it's a launching pad to New Rome. And from there, who knows? Who knows?"

My father's sense of politics was always shaky. For instance, he might

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have been smart to warn Mom about his impending candidacy. Instead, he never quite mentioned his plans to her, and she had to learn about it when friends and relatives began calling. Or maybe on second thought, Dad had a good, clear sense of politics. Because if he had said something, I think Mom would have told him half a thousand reasons why it was the wrong thing to do, and stupid; and against his better judgment, he might have listened to her wise counsel.

As it was, Mom pretty much amazed me. She was waiting for us at the dinner table, and she was furious. But she didn't do anything worse than give Dad a good hard glare. Then she sat her boys down and said, "I think your father would make a good senator. If he happens to win."

There. That's why she wasn't screaming. Mom had a good rational sense about the world, and she knew the old man didn't have a chance.

I don't remember much else about that night. We watched the electric vase, waiting for the late news. We waited to hear Dad's name. But with all the national stuff to talk about, and the international stuff, and a report from the Mars mission, plus the weather and sports, there wasn't a lot of room left for local news. I went to bed wondering if he really was running. Or was his candidacy just a bunch of misprints in a newspaper famous for its mistakes?

But Dad was running, and it didn't stay secret. Friends and classmates heard about it from their parents. My best friend knew even before I did. Nathan was this part-Jewish kid, sharp and smart in all sorts of ways. He was older than me by a few months, but it felt like years. He always knew stuff that I never even thought about knowing. We rode the same bus to school, and since his house was a couple of stops before mine, he was usually waiting for me. That next morning, wearing a big grin, he said, "I heard about your dad."

"What'd you hear?" I blurted, suddenly alarmed. I always had a what's-he-done-now feeling about my father.

"He's running for the provincial senate," Nathan told me.

"Oh, yeah."

"He entered just before the deadline," he told me.

I had no idea there were deadlines. But then again, life seemed a lot like school, and school was nothing but a string of deadlines.

"You know who he's running against?" Nathan asked.

I said, "Maybe."

"You don't."

"Maybe not," I agreed.

He named four names. Today, only one of those names matters. But I doubt if I learned any of them that morning. Nathan could have been speaking Mandarin, for all I cared.

"They're running against your father," he explained. "In the primary, this spring. Then the two candidates who earn the most votes—"

"I know how it works," I complained.

"Run against each other," he finished. "Next autumn."

That was nearly a year off. Nothing that remote could matter, and so I told Nathan, "He's going to win."

"Who is? Your father?"

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I said, "Sure," with a faltering conviction.

Nathan didn't make fun of me. I expected teasing, and I probably deserved it. But he just looked down the length of the bus, nodding to himself. "That wouldn't be the worst thing," he muttered. "Not by a long ways."

I liked Nathan for reasons other than Nathan. He lived up on the hill, in a genuinely enormous house, and because his family was wealthy, he always had fancier toys and every good game. His mother was beautiful and Jewish, which made her doubly exotic to me. His father was a government man in one of those big bureaus that helped protect our nation's industries, which made him important. But Nathan's grandfather was my favorite. The old man had emigrated from Britain, escaping some ill-defined trouble, and now he lived with his son's family, tucked away in their guest quarters. He was a fat man, a cigar smoker and a determined drinker, who'd sit and talk to me. We had actual conversations about real, adult topics. The man had this massive intelligence and endless opinions, and with a booming voice, he could speak forever about things that I never knew were important. And where Nathan would ridicule my ideas, his grandfather seemed to accept much of what I said, correcting me where I was horribly wrong, and congratulating me on my occasional and rather tiny insights.

"What you should do," Nathan once told me. "Ask to see his war game."

I'd been coming to the house for a year or two, but the game had never been mentioned.

"It's kind of a secret. But I think he'll show it to you. If you ask nice, and if you pick the right time."

"What's the right time?" I asked.

"After he's drunk too much," my friend confided, winking with a conspiratorial glee.

Looking back, I can see exactly what Nathan wanted. He wanted the excuse to see the secret game for himself. But regardless of reasons, I was curious. A few weeks later, when his grandfather seemed properly stewed, I mentioned the mysterious game. The old man stared at me for a minute, smiling in that thin way people use when they're trying not to look too pleased. Then with a low, rumbling voice, he asked, "And what, dear boy, have you heard about this game?"

"It's about the world, and war," I answered. Then I lied, saying, "That's all I know."

We were sitting in the enormous dining room. The old man planted a half-finished cigar into his buttery face, and with a calm deep voice, he said to Nathan, "Take your good friend upstairs. When I am ready, I will sound the horns of war."

We obeyed, sitting anxiously on Nathan's bedroom floor. His teenaged sister was upstairs, too. Wearing nothing but a white slip, she was jumping from her room to the bathroom and back again. I don't need to mention, there was another benefit in Nathan's friendship. I was watching for his sister, and he told me, "This'll be fun." Then his grandfather hollered, and we had to go downstairs again.

The game board had been brought out of its hiding place. With a

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glance, I knew why it was such a secret. All the words were Mandarin. The board looked new and modern, filled with a cold, slick light. With the drapes closed, the dining room was lit up by the game. Someone had spliced extra chips into the mechanical brain.

With a touch of the keypad, the old man changed the Mandarin into New Latin, and a huge map of the world emerged on a background of neat black hexagons.

"Technically," he said, "this is an illegal possession."

I knew that already.

"It came from China, and it was smuggled through the Aztec Republic. A friend of a friend did this, for a fee."

I nodded, feeling nothing but impressed.

"In the Old Empire," he explained, "a toy such as this would be labeled ideologically dangerous. In the New Lands, thankfully, we are a little less obsessed about maintaining the fabled status quo. But still, our government would be within its rights to take this from me, if only to harvest the mechanical mind. This is not a new game, but its circuits are still superior to anything we can build today."

He didn't have to tell me.

"Sit," he suggested.

I plopped into a hard chair.

"Who do you wish to be?" he asked.

Boundaries had appeared on the map. This wasn't our world, I realized. It was the past. Instead of the New Lands, there was an empty continent floating in a silvery mist. The enormity of Asia lay before me. At the far end was the Roman Empire, its territories marked with a sickly gray, while the Chinese Empire was under my hands, its green lands dotted with cities and roads and tiny military units existing as images floating inside that wondrous game board.

"You may become any civilization," the old man explained. "Your responsibility is to control the nation, or nations, that comprise your civilization."

"Be Rome," Nathan blurted. "Or India. Or Persia. Or Mongolia."

I said, "China."

A fresh cigar was lit, and a fresh whiskey was poured. And the old man grinned at me, his smooth and pale and very fat flesh shining in the game's light. There was a deep, scorching wisdom in his eyes. And with a voice holding ironies that I couldn't hear, he asked, "How did I know?"

He said, "Naturally. You wish to pick the winner."

Once the senate campaign began, we started attending church regularly.

I was pretty much of one mind about those Sunday mornings. I hated every part of them. I'd outgrown my one good suit months ago, and I could never tie the fake-silk tie properly, and the stiff leather shoes made my toes cross and ache. I hated how my complaints about my wardrobe were met with stony silence. I despised the boredom of sitting in church while strangers sang and prayed and sat silent, listening while the elderly priests gave us God's lofty opinions about the state of the world. Some-

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times, in secret, I didn't mind hearing the choir singing. I also appreciated the teenage girls swishing along in their best dresses. And when I wanted, I could open the Bible and hunt for bloody passages. Not even Mom could complain about that, sitting stiff and tired beside me, smiling for the world to see.

We belonged to the Celtic Reformed Church. I didn't appreciate it then, but our little branch of God's Word had some very wealthy believers. Our church was a new and expensive building, larger than necessary and just a little short of beautiful. Donations helped pay the tariffs and bribes required to import exotic lumber and foreign stone. Even the lights were a little spectacular—floating Japanese-made orbs that moved according to invisible commands, their shapes changing to light up the entire room, or to focus on a very specific, very important spot.

During the sermons, every light shone on the pulpit. One special morning, our bishop came to deliver the sermon, and he spoke forever about poverty and its beauty in God's eye. He explained how Christendom was special in every important way. God had blessed our faith and the Empire. How else could we have survived to this day, against titanic odds? True, we might not possess the wealth of some nations. And we didn't have spaceships or cities riding on the waves. And perhaps our science seemed backward to some observers. But what did science matter? Where was the value in flying to Mars? Nonbelievers could never enter heaven, and wasn't Heaven the only worthwhile destination in this brief, brief life of ours?

Our bishop was a very old man, and at the end of the service, when he walked past me, I heard his Indian-built heart beating like a hammer somewhere down in his belly. I thought that was odd. Later, while riding home, I described my thoughts. "If Heaven's so important," I asked, "why did the bishop buy that fancy heart? Why didn't he just let himself die?"

We were using Mom's little car. I was sitting in back, with Chester, and the adults were up front, not making so much as a squeak.

They didn't understand me, I assumed. With a stubborn tone, I continued explaining my concerns. "And if science isn't that important, why do we need fancy lights? Or cars? Or electric vases?"

My father didn't answer. But he halfway shrugged his shoulders, as if admitting the silliness of it.

Mom took a different course. She turned and stared at me, and after an icy week or two, she reminded me, "When you're in public, like today, people are watching. I want you to remember that. People are judging you and all of us. Do you know what I'm saying, Samuel?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"The world is more complicated than you can imagine," she warned. "And it's usually best to keep your opinions to yourself."

But if I couldn't imagine the world, who could?

That cold question gnawed at me. Watching the backs of my parents' heads, it occurred to me that neither of them had any special imagination, and worse than that, they were happy with their stupidity.

* * *

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I picked China, and lost.

The game was set at novice level. Its rules and the mechanical mind were made simple, and I had more people and money and better armies and the finest navy in the world. And I lost. India invaded, and Japan invaded, and Nathan laughed at me, watching my collapse accelerate with the centuries. His grandfather was more patient, reminding both of us, "This is a simulation, and a decidedly crude one, at that. Even if you began again, and even if you made the same initial moves, events would play out in some very different fashion." Then he said the word, "Chaos," with a genuine fondness. "Chaos can break the strongest nation, and it can build empires from the weakest tribe."

I had no idea what he was telling me.

Nathan pretended to understand. "Let me play," he begged. He had been waiting most of an hour to make that request. "At level three? Okay, Grandpa? And I'll be the Roman Empire."

At level three, there were more rules and more circumstances to watch, and the other powers were smarter by a long ways. At first, it looked as if my friend was failing badly. He let the Great Wall of Constantine fall to ruins. He allowed invaders from the steppes to descend while civil wars spread through the Empire, a dozen little nations blossoming in the mayhem. Then for no sensible reason, he turned those new countries against each other. I thought he was crazy. I confidently laughed at him. But even while his little nations fought pointless, nearly endless wars, Nathan appeared serene. Even when the plagues erupted, he wore a big smug know-it-all smile.

Meanwhile, China was invaded. The Mongols came and took everything, and then after a long while, they were absorbed. When new Chinese leaders appeared, they decided they didn't need the rest of the world. The great ocean-going junks were allowed to sink, and the ancient trade routes vanished under desert sands. As the centuries passed, little changed in that piece of the world. It was as if some great spell had been cast over its people and the emerald lands.

The Roman Empire remained splintered and angry. But each new nation built its own navy, and with armies conditioned by war and disease, each spread across the world, conquering every wild continent before pushing into India, and then, invading the suddenly backward China.

Elbows on the table, I watched a very strange world emerge.

"This is a simulation," the old man said one last time. Then he set down an empty glass, telling me, "But if one were to set the game to the most difficult level, and if each side competed equally well . . . well, the game never ends the same way twice. But there are patterns. Lessons, you might call them. One time out of five, the Christian states come to dominate the world."

I looked at the date.

1933, by the Christian count.

This was our year, and nothing was familiar. There were no spaceships, much less cities on the moon. China was mangled and poor, and India belonged to an independent Britain, and again, with a sick surety, war was breaking out in the remnants of the Empire. The Germans were march-

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ing into Gaul, and the Slavs were massing their millions, and in the New Lands, a new Roman republic was building armies and fleets, and crude propeller planes were waiting to carry the first uranium bombs.

As a family, for the sake of the campaign, we went to bake sales. We witnessed the start of running races and tulip festivals and cock fights. We attended the grand opening of a fancy food market, and I ate enough cookies to throw up. Dressed in our finest, we stood bunched together in big rooms and small rooms, smiling with a trained enthusiasm. I remember a strange man patting my brother on the shoulders, saying, "Here's the swimmer, hey? What a little steamboat!"

Jerk, I thought. Smiling still.

Then he gave me a distracted handshake, asking my little brother, "So what do you think? Another month till the primary, and it's down to a three-horse race."

Having just turned eight, my brother could ask, "What are you talking about?"

The stranger laughed, winking at our father. "Leonard? Didn't you tell your boys?"

When my father lied, he would smile. He was smiling like a lighthouse just then, saying, "I guess I hadn't gotten around to it."

"Two of your pop's opponents are done. Finished." The stranger didn't realize that we hadn't heard the gossip. "And as it happens, it's the two front-runners that are gone. One quit for health reasons. He says. And the other . . . well, let's just say there's some dirt. Something about young girls. And if he doesn't pull out of the race, he's going to look like an absolute idiot." Again, he patted my brother on the shoulders. "So yeah, boys. A three-horse race now. Anybody's race!"

Dad made the nightly news, if only in little doses. His name was mentioned in passing, or a baby-faced reporter would speak to him for five or six seconds. From the EV, I learned that my father was concerned about values in the youth. Which meant me, I realized. I learned that he wanted to protect our markets and our good Roman traditions, and he never quite mentioned that his Roman-built Testudo was a piece of crap. But more than anything, the reporters wanted to know about our pet cheetah. They wanted pictures of Hadrian. Everybody got a real kick out of seeing my dad scratching at the cat's little ears, ready to pull back his hand at the first sign of trouble.

At school, I enjoyed a minor celebrity. Girls would ask me if I was Samuel Dunlop, and when they giggled in front of me, I didn't feel hurt. I felt special enough to hold my ground, and maybe once or twice, I kept the girls giggling. Of course the guys weren't nearly as impressed. But there were moments when I could see even the bullies making new calculations. What if my father won the race? Senators had power, they had been told. How much power would I wield, just by being his son? I watched them as they weighed these important political considerations, and then in the next instant, surrendering to a fatalistic whim, they would shrug their shoulders and give me a good hard smack.

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Beating up an important person was just too much of a lure.

How much more celebrity could I tolerate? I asked myself. Lying on the ground, hands pressed against my aching belly.

As a family, we attended a picnic.

It must have been some company's big spring picnic, although really, I don't have any clear memory of why hundreds of people had gathered in the park. They were just there, and of course we showed up. And of course we wore better clothes than anybody had ever worn to a chicken-eating event. Mom told us to behave, as always, but this time there were new warnings. The local news was going to be there with EV cameras, which made the audience potentially enormous, and important, and if we were anything but saints, the world was going to crumble to dust.

There was an army of kids at the picnic, and I didn't know any of them. But they had a bashball, and a game broke out, and one of us asked permission to play. Probably Chester, since there was a better chance of a "Yes" when he asked those kinds of questions. I found myself in the trenches, playing against a genuinely huge girl. Fat, and strong like every fat girl, and maybe a head taller than me. On the first play, she mowed me down. On the next play, she used a thick arm and flung me on my ass. But the worst whipping came from our team general. Staring at me with an easy contempt, he asked, "Are you going to let that bitch win?"

No. I decided to make a heroic stand, and with a virtuous rage, I reclaimed my place on the line and threw a shoulder into my opponent. My swimmer's muscles delivered a good hard blow. The girl stopped in midstride. But the jarring awakened her own pride and rage, and again, with the game flowing around us, she set her feet and drove at me. In memory, that next collision was crushing, and epic, ineffectual and extremely painful; and again, we stepped back and gathered our strength before charging. In all, we collided maybe a dozen times. But it felt like a thousand impacts. The girl began to sweat and gasp for breath. The rest of the world grew still and quiet. I realized eventually that the game had paused, boys and a few girls standing in a circle, watching the spectacle. We would step back, and charge. Back, and charge. And in the end, I won. I held up to the girl's worst blows, and she finally turned and stumbled away, crying. My victory was a sweet thing for all of two minutes. Then my mother found me. She found me and grabbed me by my half-dislocated shoulder, and with a low fury, she explained what it means to be embarrassed, to watch the daughter of an important somebody weeping uncontrollably, talking about the wicked awful monster boy who had just beaten her up.

My punishment began by sitting still and being quiet.

Three of the candidates were giving speeches. The man who liked young girls was still officially in the race, but he had the good sense not to show up. About that first candidate, I remember nothing. Nothing. I was sitting on a plastic folding chair. I was glowering at my scuffed shoes and my fists, my shoulder aching while my frail pride tried to heal itself. A hard stretch of applause made me lift my eyes. The first speaker was

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leaving now, and my father was slowly climbing up onto the little stage, smiling at us with a remarkable shyness.

I had never seen my father so nervous. In his natural environment—inside a little office or a smoky tavern—he was a marvel. He could talk to anyone, and for hours, charming them with an artful ease. But here were hundreds of people, and cameras, and reporters wearing skeptical expressions. He was nervous, making little jokes that didn't cause anybody to laugh. Then he began to talk about what he wanted to do as a senator. He wanted to work hard. He wanted to be their friend in the provincial capital of New Carthage. He wanted the roads patched. (My father's voice gained a genuine life at that point. He had a visceral hatred for the potholes that kept knocking our wheels out of alignment.) And again, for emphasis, he reminded everybody that he wanted to work hard for them, and to be their very good friend.

If there was any big applause, I don't remember it.

I remember Mom pissing me off. I was ready to clap, but she had to give me a warning nudge anyway. As if I'd forget to clap for my father. But neither of us applauded for long, and we remained seated, and during that next little silence, the last candidate came forward.

He wasn't a big man. He had black hair and blue eyes that I could see from five rows back. For some reason, he wore a uniform. Or maybe his clothes were cut so they would resemble a uniform. With a practiced ease, he took his place in front of the microphone, a look of absolute focus coming into his milky white face. I remember that moment. I remember staring at him, waiting for whatever word dropped out of his mouth first. His little moustache twitched, and his lips parted, and with an accented voice, he said, "We are a great people, and a noble people. But we are surrounded by enemies. Yellow enemies. Brown enemies. Red ones, and black. Even within our own ranks, we have traitors who are working against us, trying to undermine the great things that are our duty, and our destiny.

"The white Christian people of the world deserve this world!

"For too long, we have let ourselves remain weak, and poor. But if we can find the will, joining our hands in the common good . . . if we finally assume the mantle of greatness . . . then the world will be ours, and the stars. . . !"

In essence, that was his speech.

I can't remember the exact words, but I'm sure he didn't waste any breath talking about potholes. And he never explained how a local senator—a junior officer in a New Lands province—could bring the smallest change to the enormous world. But when the candidate finished, screaming at the microphone one last time, the applause was instantaneous, and furious, and I felt myself being carried along. A reborn Rome! And all of our enemies defeated! What could be more wonderful? I was thinking. Then a hand clamped down on my hands, keeping them from applauding anymore.

It was my mother's hand.

"I was being polite," I lied.

"Don't be," was her advice. "This one time, Samuel . . . you really don't want to be polite. . . ."

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* * *

Putting words inside quotation marks is a lie, by the way. When I tell this story, I have no real memory about what words people used. That's the way it is with most people, I'm sure. What I remember are feelings—my twelve, nearly thirteen-year-old feelings—and sloppy little pieces of certain moments that felt important at the time. Inside this entire story, I don't think there are more than two or three moments when I'm perfectly sure what words were spoken.

The day after the picnic was a school day.

Like always, I sat with Nathan on the bus. I mentioned the picnic and bashball and my father speaking, and Nathan asked how the speech went, and I lied. "Fine," I claimed. And then I talked for a full mile about the little candidate with the blue eyes. "Wouldn't it be wonderful?" I asked. "Rome strong again. The Chinese and Indians not telling us what to do. All of our enemies sent packing, the bastards. Then we could build anything we wanted, and spaceships. Just think, Nathan! You and me could fly off to Jupiter, or someplace. . . !"

My best friend looked at me, saying nothing.

Then we pulled up in front of school, and I didn't see him again until gym class. He was dressing, and I was dressing at the other end of the aisle, and a couple of guys came up beside him. They were classmates of ours, but for the usual reasons, they were older by a year. Older, and bigger. Carrying themselves with a practiced menace, they did nothing but poke my friend in the ribs, and laugh. I stood at a safe distance, watching. The biggest kid said "Jew," at least twice. And then Nathan handed money to the other kid. And when they were gone, he turned away from me and finished dressing.

I don't remember him talking to me during gym class.

Or on the bus ride home, either.

When I stood for my stop, Nathan stood.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

He said, "Nothing."

The driver opened the back door, and together, we jumped to the curb. Then the bus pulled away, the dirty Roman engine leaving the air swirling with fumes and soot. And again, I asked my best friend, "What are you doing?"

"Wait," he told me.

"For what?"

"Just wait."

So we stood there. The bus left, and the cars following after the bus started to climb the long hill. Then again, I began to ask what we were waiting for, and as soon as my mouth was open, he hit me.

I fell down.

And he kicked me. Not once, and not softly. A day's worth of being furious went into those kicks, and then he kneeled over me, saying, "Asshole."

I've always remembered that one word.

"Do you know who the enemies are?" Nathan asked me. "The traitors, I mean. The ones Mr. Blue-Eyes was talking about. Do you know who?"

He said, "It's the Jews."

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I didn't believe him.

"It's me, Samuel!"

And then I did something supremely stupid. With a gasp, I reminded him, "But you're only half-Jewish."

Again, he kicked me. Then he shook his head, watching me writhe in misery. I remember his face—the glowering, betrayed look that he was throwing at me—and I remember his eyes—how they were squinting and tearing up, looking miserable and very much scared.

Sometimes I ran errands with my father, helping the campaign.

Mostly, I remember being bored. Sometimes there were meetings with backers or people who might want to become backers. Sometimes the work involved putting up signs in yards and carrying packets of flyers around strange neighborhoods. Half of our basement was filled with signs and flyers and metal buttons that read *Vote Dunlop*. I began to appreciate that running for political office was an expensive chore. And we weren't spending nearly as much as the blue-eyed candidate. Every night, without fail, we saw him at least two or three times on the EV. Even when Dad turned the channel, he couldn't escape those commercials—slick, professional, full of music and cheering crowds.

Our basic flyer was a rectangle of stiff paper. Dad's photograph was five years old, taken when he still had his hair. My name was on the flyer, and Chester's, and our ages. There was a long list of Dad's accomplishments, and that was the first time that I can remember hearing anything about his militia service. Every young man had to be in the militia, and so that didn't surprise me. But the flyer told me that my own dad had earned some kind of special award for his service.

"What's a Red-tail?" I asked.

We were riding down an anonymous street. Dad was looking straight ahead, and I was sitting beside him. The back seat was filled with flyers and yard signs and boxes full of rattling buttons. Hadrian was busy napping in the old straw.

"It's a hawk," Dad began. "A big one. We've got them around here—"

"The Red-tail Ribbon," I interrupted. "You won it."

"It's nothing," he said.

Which didn't make sense. But before I could say as much, he told me, "It's a militia thing. If you serve on the frontier, and you see combat—"

"You did?" I blurted.

He didn't answer.

"You actually fought?" I asked. Then I rapidly reviewed what little I could remember about old border skirmishes. "Who'd you fight? The Mandan? The Lakota?" And then with an evil delight, I asked, "Was it the Aztecs?"

The Aztecs were a real nation. The other tribes were just patches of color on the map, each sponsored by a different Asian power.

"Was it?" I pressed.

It must have been an enormous temptation for my father. His son was desperate to find some excuse to worship him, and it would have been worship. I would have believed anything that painted my father as being

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a soldier of consequence. But he resisted that easy deification. With a shrug of his shoulders, he admitted, "People were trying to cross our border, and my unit lobbed shells in front of them."

"Were they enemy soldiers?" I hoped.

"No," he confessed. "No, they were just . . . just some people trying to slip across. . . ."

"And you shot in front of them?"

"Mostly," he said. Then with a suddenly angry voice, he said, "And now we're not talking about this anymore."

Nathan's grandfather filled the front door. One of his soft round hands was resting on the doorknob, while the other clung to a thick glass filled with some deliciously colored liquor. With an odd smile, he stared down at me. "We haven't seen you for a little while, Samuel." Then a sturdy, engaging laugh erupted, and he smiled at my father. "Mr. Dunlop. It is my deepest pleasure, sir. Please, please. Come inside."

Except for the old man, the house seemed empty. He led us into the darkened dining room. "Sit, my friends. If you wish."

Dad glanced at the game board.

"Cigar? Or a drink, perhaps?"

"No, thank you."

"Sit. Please, sirs. You are my guests here."

We settled into two hard chairs. Then with a quiet voice, my father allowed, "This is quite a map."

"Did your son mention this toy? No? Well, good!" The old man chuckled, winking at me. "It is, I suppose, a bit of a secret. Rather illegal, and there's no reason to broadcast its existence to the world." Then he launched into a crisp, thorough explanation of the game. "Samuel played one scenario, and he witnessed a few potential outcomes. This is a very different scenario. This is our world as it stands today . . . reduced, or enlarged, into a set of contesting algorithms and modeled personalities. . . ."

A thick finger touched a control.

The map evaporated, leaving a white background covered with neat black hexagons.

"I won't waste your time, Mr. Dunlop. Suffice to say I could run this scenario thousands of times, and to the satisfaction of every bloodless mathematician and chilled intellect, I could prove that certain policies, and certain leaders, would be dangerous to us. To the Old Empire, to the New Lands, and naturally, to your good sons."

Father nodded as if he understood, and smiled.

"Politics," said the old man.

He said, "I must tell you, sir. It's a very brave thing to be a political animal in these times."

Hearing a compliment, Father squared his shoulders.

"I once belonged to that noble profession," he continued. "Perhaps you are unaware, but I delved into my native island's politics, on more than one occasion. Which is, I should add, one of the compelling reasons why I came to these safer shores. I spoke my mind. I argued for my causes. But I have a tremendous amount of skin, as I'm sure you've noticed, sir,

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and I rather want that skin to remain safe. At least for the present moment."

I shivered.

My father cleared his throat. "When we talked on the phone . . . you mentioned helping my candidacy—"

"Indeed. I very much would like that, yes."

"How?"

The old man smiled and puffed on his cigar, saying nothing.

"Money?" asked Dad.

"I could. I could be most generous. But to be frank, it's too late for money. No sum, no matter how extravagant, can insure his defeat in the coming election."

Who was he talking about?

The old man lowered his cigar, blowing out a long cloud of smelly smoke. "Make no mistake: He is a bastard. A serpent. A charmer, and a teetotaler, and the worst kind of dreamer. What he believes is reprehensible, and sadly, his hatreds are quite ordinary. What motivates him is an intoxicating sense of supreme destiny. Are you aware, Mr. Dunlop? Your opponent was involved in a failed attempt to spark a civil war. His hope was to unite the Germanic provinces against Rome, and then conquer the Old Empire, and from there, he would have launched a suicidal assault against the Far East."

Finally, I realized who the *he* was.

"Unfortunately, his rebellion was little more than a joke. Young men pretending to be a mighty force, and they were crushed in a day. If our mutual enemy had done any real harm, he would have been executed; but instead of death, he received a simple prison sentence. Incarceration is always dangerous; the monster had time to think. To organize, and plan. He wrote a small book—a brutal little treatise on hatred and rampant nationalism. I own three copies myself. I wish I had a million copies, and I could make every voter read it from cover to cover. But I don't, and I can't. What I can do is give you one copy. The man's own words should erase any doubts you hold about his madness."

Dad stared at the plain of empty hexagons. Then his eyes lifted, and with a weary voice, he said, "All right. I need help, but it's not going to be money. So how am I supposed to beat this bastard?"

The old man grinned and sipped at his drink. "Samuel tells me that you are an exceptional salesman."

Dad glanced at me, a little surprised.

Warily pleased.

"I want you to use your considerable skills, sir." Leaning across the table, hands laid flat on the game board, Nathan's grandfather said, "With my help, I want you to help me, sir. Help me peel the uniform off that very ugly serpent."

The campaign office filled what used to be a drinking tavern. Dad found that funny. He tried to laugh as he parked, and he kept hold of his smile even when he had stopped laughing. A man stepped out of the office, blinking in the sunshine. Two other men followed after him. Dad

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opened his door and stepped out, and the first man said, "If you would, sir. Lift your arms."

The other men held electric wands. The wands hummed as they passed across my father's body, and then the first man said, "Open your coat, Mr. Dunlop. Please."

"Does everybody get this honor?" Dad inquired.

"Your coat, sir. Now."

He complied, glancing over at me.

"Would the boy like to come inside, too?"

Dad said, "No."

The first man smiled and looked at me. "I think he would. Wouldn't you, son?"

I looked at my father, then back at Hadrian.

"Your pet will be fine here," the man said. He was fat and jolly-looking, and when I stepped down next to him, I caught a whiff of what almost seemed to be perfume. "Like your father, lift your arms."

I listened to the humming.

"He's expecting you," the man reported. "Don't keep him waiting."

We walked into a barely lit room, long and nearly empty. The blue-eyed candidate sat in the back, behind a massive desk that was far fancier than anything else in the place. He didn't stand. He barely looked up, writing on a fancy Chinese tablet. I thought that was very strange. The man hated the yellow horde, yet he used their machinery. To a twelve year-old boy, nothing smells worse than the tiniest whiff of hypocrisy, and it was all I could do not to turn up my nose.

The blue eyes stared at us.

A stern voice said, "Mr. Pothole. Have a seat." Then the eyes looked past us, and with his German-Latin, he said, "I am quite busy. Quite busy. What is this business you wished to discuss with me?"

My father sat, and I sat on the only other chair.

"I'm going to lose," Dad began. "That's pretty much guaranteed. I can't beat you in the primary, or that other guy."

I stared at the blue eyes. Nothing else mattered.

"I just wanted you to know. After the primary, when I end up third, I'll throw my support to you. I'll work for your election. Anything that can help, I'll do it. That's what I wanted to tell you."

There was a brief, cold silence.

Then the candidate asked, "Why me? Don't you approve of the other man's politics?"

"God, no!" exclaimed Dad.

Then his head dropped. In the corner of an eye, I could see my father wiping at his bald scalp. I would have loved to seen his expression. The anger, the misery. But I had to keep my eyes straight ahead, blinking as infrequently as possible.

"What do you believe, Mr. Dunlop?"

For a long moment, my father held his tongue. And with a calculated rage and the absolute perfect tone, he said exactly three words.

"Fucking kike lover!"

I remember that moment perfectly. The moment, the practiced

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words, and that feeling of standing on some great hilltop, any little motion destined to send everything falling in one of a million separate directions.

The blue eyes closed slowly, and opened again, and the pen was set aside. "Don't worry about our mutual opponent," the candidate purred. "He is an adulterer. He sleeps with his secretary. A man like that isn't fit for public office, and I think in a few days, the world will find out what kind of man he is."

"Really?" Dad gasped. "God, that would be great!"

"So you see, we are destined to survive the primary. You and me. One of us will be the senator. And perhaps the other one, if he is willing, could play a little role in the new senator's organization."

With a seamless ease, Dad said, "Could I?"

The candidate was amused, more than anything. He smiled and glanced at me, and taking courage from my unblinking stare, he said, "Mr. Dunlop. I understand that you're some kind of war hero. Please, if you have a moment, tell me all about yourself."

The candidate was supposed to be very busy, yet he had time to chat with my father for the next hour-plus. For a while, he would ask little questions, and Dad would tell a somewhat altered version of his life story. Yes, he was a decorated veteran. He had fought the red scourge on the frontier. But everything since had been a string of disappointments and outright failures. More than once, he blamed the Jews for undercutting his new businesses. What could be done? He wanted to know. How could the world be made fair and right for all the white Christians?

Gradually, the candidate began to talk. More often, and for longer stretches of time, he would answer my father's leading questions. Then an hour and a half had passed, and the blue eyes were burning, and the man had stood up, holding court from behind his big desk, pounding on the top of it with a fury that left me terrified, and weak.

It was the fleshy, perfumed man who stopped the terrible show. He shuffled up to the candidate, whispered a few words and laughed in a jolly fashion.

"Of course," the candidate said. Then to us, he explained, "I have an appearance. We'll have to resume this talk at another time." He shook both our hands. I remember a clammy heat and a strong grip, and he stared into my eyes, absolutely unaware that a fleet of very tiny, very modern electronics were floating on my tears, transporting every sight and sound to a relay device set up in a nearby warehouse. In a few hours, an edited version of the candidate's raging, curse-strewn tirade would end up on the nightly news, and all but the most hateful voters would turn away from him.

But that was still in the future.

With his new allies following after him, the candidate walked out into the afternoon sun. "Thank you, Mr. Dunlop. We will be in touch."

Dad started to fish for his keys.

"That cheetah," said the candidate. "I've heard about it. Let me look at him, for a minute."

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Dad didn't want to. But he had no choice. He lowered the back window a little ways, and Hadrian poked his head through the gap. The candidate stood at a respectful distance. He grinned and said, "What a noble, proud beast." Then he turned to me, winking. "You're a very lucky lad, having a pet such as this."

I said, "I know."

Later, when Nathan and I were friends again, I'd tell him that part of the story over and over again.

It was his favorite part.

"I know," I said.

"A lucky lad," the candidate repeated.

Inspiration struck me. All of a sudden, I said, "Pet him." I smiled and said, "Really, he loves being petted behind the ears."

"Does he?" the candidate asked, a little tentative now.

"Oh, sure. Go on!"

Dad didn't say a single word.

The pale clammy hand started to reach for the ears, and the cat watched the fingers, eyes smiling . . . and then came the sharp click of incisors slicing into living flesh.

There were always swim meets in the summer. One of the meets was in New Carthage, at the big pool in the main city park. We left before dawn, taking Mom's car so we were sure to make it. My brother had a string of races, and I think he won most of them. I had a couple, and I don't remember where I finished. I don't care now, and I barely cared then.

What I remember is a huge tent that one of the teams had set up on the grass.

What I remember, always, is stepping into the odd orange light that filtered through the phony silk, the heat of the day diminishing while the air grew damp and close. A hundred or more bodies were sitting and standing inside that tiny space, and everybody was trying to hold their breath. A portable EV was set on a cooler. With a special antenna, it was picking up the feed from a Chinese satellite. While I watched, stunned and thrilled, a round hatch pulled open on another world, and a man in a padded suit climbed down a long ladder, jumping down onto the dusty red surface that had never before known the touch of a human being.

Everybody cheered.

I remember that wild, honest roar coming up from everywhere. Including from me.

Sometime later that day, just by chance, I was standing near the main gate of the pool. A familiar man came walking past me. I looked at him, and he said, "Samuel," with this easy, friendly voice that I halfway recognized. But it took me several moments to place both the face and voice. By then, he was introducing himself. He shook my hand, and I asked, "What are you doing here?"

Chuckling, he said, "I'm a swimmer. I always have been."

There were master's events at the meet. He must have been taking part in a few races, as well as speaking to his potential voters.

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"Did you happen to watch? The Mars landing?"

"Oh, sure."

"Wasn't it wonderful?"

"Yeah," I said, without a shred of doubt. "It was great."

"Humans have now walked on Mars," he remarked. Then he used the Chinese word for the planet, adding, "This is a great day for our little world."

I couldn't agree more.

"Is your father here?"

I pointed in a vague direction.

"I need to speak to him, if I could. I want to thank him."

"For what?"

"A great deal, the way I hear it told." Then he winked at me, commenting, "We have the same good friend, I understand." And he named Nathan's grandfather.

For half a second, I thought about him sleeping with his secretary.

I didn't say one word.

"Walk me to your father, please."

"Okay."

We left the pool, moving at a strong pace. "This is a wonderful world we live in. Did you know that, Samuel?"

"I guess. . . ."

"We're blessed." He kept chuckling, reminding me, "We're walking on Mars. People are well-fed, and mostly educated. There are no important wars at the moment. And diseases have been mostly eradicated."

I nodded, and smiled nervously.

"In a different century," he said, "you would have had to worry. About measles, and polio, and the mumps."

"I've had my shots," I said.

"Exactly." Then he patted me on the shoulder, saying, "I have weak eyes. Yet I don't wear glasses."

"There's a surgery," I said. "If you're rich. . . ."

I let my voice collapse. Was it stupid, calling him rich?

But he just laughed it off, telling me, "I wish everyone could have these advantages. And I think one day—sooner than you could guess—everybody will have them."

Confident and a little cocky, I chimed in, "I'm sorry. But I'm too young to vote for you."

He barely noticed my joke.

"End the tariffs, and the censors, and open up our markets . . . if we can finally join with the rest of the world in every meaningful way . . . that's what I think we need to do. . . ."

I wasn't sure whom he was talking to.

"If I run for President of the New Lands," he asked, "sometime in the next few years, would you vote for me, Samuel?"

"No," I reported. "I'm voting for my father."

He laughed, and walked faster, and I had to practically run to keep up with his long, happy strides. O

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START UP COMPANY

Someone says once too often: "This place is a zoo"
and Mother Nature loses it.

Gibbons brachiate in the supply rooms,
streaming toilet paper and printer ribbons,
throwing boxes of paper clips and felt tip pens
out the windows,
taking revenge for disturbed habitats.

Frogs splash in the urinals
lions lounge in the cafeteria, licking
open all the cream containers.

A tapir has taken over Admin and makes love
to the water cooler, while bats
fly in and out of warehouse doors.

Flamingos nest in the data entry pool,
their long legs folded around hanging files,
beaks dipping for algae in the humidifiers.

The CEO runs back and forth screaming
for his vice presidents
until the tigers kill and eat him
out of mercy to everyone else.

Janitors cheer for the elephants,
scrub their backs with push brooms,
secretaries
fetch cups of alfalfa sprouts with plenty of sugar
for the zebras.
There is now a popcorn stand and balloons
in security, birds are flying in the atrium,
buffalos are in the bathrooms, wallowing
with the hippos.

Stockholders agree
the company's a lot more fun now and they all
sign up for Clown College.

—Terry A. Garey

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"Here's Looking at You Kid," our last story from this highly regarded author, appeared in the April issue. Mr. Resnick's new novel, *The Return of Santiago,* is available from Tor Books. He returns to our pages with a poignant short story about why . . .

ROBOTS DON'T CRY

Mike Resnick

They call us graverobbers, but we're not.

What we do is plunder the past and offer it to the present. We hit old worlds, deserted worlds, worlds that nobody wants any longer, and we pick up anything we think we can sell to the vast collectibles market. You want a seven-hundred-year-old timepiece? A thousand-year-old bed? An actual printed book? Just put in your order, and sooner or later we'll fill it.

Every now and then we strike it rich. Usually we make a profit. Once in a while we just break even. There's only been one world where we actually lost money; I still remember it—Greenwillow. Except that it wasn't green, and there wasn't a willow on the whole damned planet.

There was a robot, though. We found him, me and the Baroni, in a barn, half-hidden under a pile of ancient computer parts and self-feeders for mutated cattle.

We were picking through the stuff, wondering if there was any market for it, tossing most of it aside, when the sun peeked in through the doorway and glinted off a prismatic eye.

"Hey, take a look at what we've got here," I said. "Give me a hand digging it out."

The junk had been stored a few feet above where he'd been standing and the rack broke, practically burying him. One of his legs was bent at an impossible angle, and his expressionless face was covered with cobwebs. The Baroni lumbered over—when you've got three legs you don't glide gracefully—and studied the robot.

"Interesting," he said. He never used whole sentences when he could annoy me with a single word that could mean almost anything.

"He should pay our expenses, once we fix him up and get him running," I said.

"A human configuration," noted the Baroni.

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"Yeah, we still made 'em in our own image until a couple of hundred years ago."

"Impractical."

"Spare me your practicalities," I said. "Let's dig him out."

"Why bother?"

Trust a Baroni to miss the obvious. "Because he's got a memory cube," I answered. "Who the hell knows what he's seen? Maybe we'll find out what happened here."

"Greenwillow has been abandoned since long before you were born and I was hatched," replied the Baroni, finally stringing some words together. "Who cares what happened?"

"I know it makes your head hurt, but try to use your brain," I said, grunting as I pulled at the robot's arm. It came off in my hands. "Maybe whoever he worked for hid some valuables." I dropped the arm onto the floor. "Maybe he knows where. We don't just have to sell junk, you know; there's a market for the good stuff too."

The Baroni shrugged and began helping me uncover the robot. "I hear a lot of ifs and maybes," he muttered.

"Fine," I said. "Just sit on what passes for your ass, and I'll do it myself."

"And let you keep what we find without sharing it?" he demanded, suddenly throwing himself into the task of moving the awkward feeders. After a moment he stopped and studied one. "Big cows," he noted.

"Maybe ten or twelve feet at the shoulder, judging from the size of the stalls and the height of the feeders," I agreed. "But there weren't enough to fill the barn. Some of those stalls were never used."

Finally we got the robot uncovered, and I checked the code on the back of his neck.

"How about that?" I said. "The son of a bitch must be five hundred years old. That makes him an antique by anyone's definition. I wonder what we can get for him?"

The Baroni peered at the code. "What does AB stand for?"

"Aldebaran. Alabama. Abrams' Planet. Or maybe just the model number. Who the hell knows? We'll get him running and maybe he can tell us." I tried to set him on his feet. No luck. "Give me a hand."

"To the ship?" asked the Baroni, using sentence fragments again as he helped me stand the robot upright.

"No," I said. "We don't need a sterile environment to work on a robot. Let's just get him out in the sunlight, away from all this junk, and then we'll have a couple of mechs check him over."

We half-carried and half-dragged him to the crumbling concrete pad beyond the barn, then laid him down while I tightened the muscles in my neck, activating the embedded micro-chip, and directed the signal by pointing to the ship, which was about half a mile away.

"This is me," I said as the chip carried my voice back to the ship's computer. "Wake up Mechs Three and Seven, feed them everything you've got on robots going back a millennium, give them repair kits and anything else they'll need to fix a broken robot of indeterminate age, and then home in on my signal and send them to me."

"Why those two?" asked the Baroni.

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Sometimes I wondered why I partnered with anyone that dumb. Then I remembered the way he could sniff out anything with a computer chip or cube, no matter how well it was hidden, so I decided to give him a civil answer. He didn't get that many from me; I hoped he appreciated it.

"Three's got those extendable eyestalks, and it can do microsurgery, so I figure it can deal with any faulty micro-circuits. As for Seven, it's strong as an ox. It can position the robot, hold him aloft, move him any way that Three directs it to. They're both going to show up filled to the brim with everything the ship's data bank has on robots, so if he's salvageable, they'll find a way to salvage him."

I waited to see if he had any more stupid questions. Sure enough, he had.

"Why would anyone come here?" he asked, looking across the bleak landscape.

"I came for what passes for treasure these days," I answered him. "I have no idea why you came."

"I meant originally," he said, and his face started to glow that shade of pea-soup green that meant I was getting to him. "Nothing can grow, and the ultraviolet rays would eventually kill most animals. So why?"

"Because not all humans are as smart as me."

"It's an impoverished world," continued the Baroni. "What valuables could there be?"

"The usual," I replied. "Family heirlooms. Holographs. Old kitchen implements. Maybe even a few old Republic coins."

"Republic currency can't be spent."

"True—but a few years ago I saw a five-credit coin sell for three hundred Maria Teresa dollars. They tell me it's worth twice that today."

"I didn't know that," admitted the Baroni.

"I'll bet they could fill a book with all the things you don't know."

"Why are Men so sardonic and ill-mannered?"

"Probably because we have to spend so much time with races like the Baroni," I answered.

Mechs Three and Seven rolled up before he could reply.

"Reporting for duty, sir," said Mech Three in his high-pitched mechanical voice.

"This is a very old robot," I said, indicating what we'd found. "It's been out of commission for a few centuries, maybe even longer. See if you can get it working again."

"We live to serve," thundered Mech Seven.

"I can't tell you how comforting I find that." I turned to the Baroni. "Let's grab some lunch."

"Why do you always speak to them that way?" asked the Baroni as we walked away from the mechs. "They don't understand sarcasm."

"It's my nature," I said. "Besides, if they don't know it's sarcasm, it must sound like a compliment. Probably pleases the hell out of them."

"They are machines," he responded. "You can no more please them than offend them."

"Then what difference does it make?"

"The more time I spend with Men, the less I understand them," said the Baroni, making the burbling sound that passed for a deep sigh. "I look

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forward to getting the robot working. Being a logical and unemotional entity, it will make more sense."

"Spare me your smug superiority," I shot back. "You're not here because Papa Baroni looked at Mama Baroni with logic in his heart."

The Baroni burbled again. "You are hopeless," he said at last.

We had one of the mechs bring us our lunch, then sat with our backs propped against opposite sides of a gnarled old tree while we ate. I didn't want to watch his snakelike lunch writhe and wriggle, protesting every inch of the way, as he sucked it down like the long, living piece of spaghetti it was, and he had his usual moral qualms, which I never understood, about watching me bite into a sandwich. We had just about finished when Mech Three approached us.

"All problems have been fixed," it announced brightly.

"That was fast," I said.

"There was nothing broken." It then launched into a three-minute explanation of whatever it had done to the robot's circuitry.

"That's enough," I said when it got down to a dissertation on the effect of mu-mesons on negative magnetic fields in regard to prismatic eyes. "I'm wildly impressed. Now let's go take a look at this beauty."

I got to my feet, as did the Baroni, and we walked back to the concrete pad. The robot's limbs were straight now, and his arm was restored, but he still lay motionless on the crumbling surface.

"I thought you said you fixed him."

"I did," replied Mech Three. "But my programming compelled me not to activate it until you were present."

"Fine," I said. "Wake him up."

The little Mech made one final quick adjustment and backed away as the robot hummed gently to life and sat up.

"Welcome back," I said.

"Back?" replied the robot. "I have not been away."

"You've been asleep for five centuries, maybe six."

"Robots cannot sleep." He looked around. "Yet everything has changed. How is this possible?"

"You were deactivated," said the Baroni. "Probably your power supply ran down."

"Deactivated," the robot repeated. He swiveled his head from left to right, surveying the scene. "Yes. Things cannot change this much from one instant to the next."

"Have you got a name?" I asked him.

"Samson 4133. But Miss Emily calls me Sammy."

"Which name do you prefer?"

"I am a robot. I have no preferences."

I shrugged. "Whatever you say, Samson."

"Sammy," he corrected me.

"I thought you had no preferences."

"I don't," said the robot. "But *she* does."

"Has she got a name?"

"Miss Emily."

"Just Miss Emily?" I asked. "No other names to go along with it?"

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"Miss Emily is what I was instructed to call her."

"I assume she is a child," said the Baroni, with his usual flair for discovering the obvious.

"She was once," said Sammy. "I will show her to you."

Then somehow, I never did understand the technology involved, he projected a full-sized holograph of a small girl, perhaps five years old, wearing a frilly purple-and-white outfit. She had rosy cheeks and bright shining blue eyes, and a smile that men would die for someday if given half the chance.

It was only after she took a step forward, a very awkward step, that I realized she had a prosthetic left leg.

"Too bad," I said. "A pretty little girl like that."

"Was she born that way, I wonder?" said the Baroni.

"I love you, Sammy," said the holograph.

I hadn't expected sound, and it startled me. She had such a happy voice. Maybe she didn't know that most little girls came equipped with two legs. After all, this was an underpopulated colony world; for all I knew, she'd never seen anyone but her parents.

"It is time for your nap, Miss Emily," said Sammy's voice. "I will carry you to your room." Another surprise. The voice didn't seem to come from the robot, but from somewhere . . . well, offstage. He was recreating the scene exactly as it had happened, but we saw it through his eyes. Since he couldn't see himself, neither could we.

"I'll walk," said the child. "Mother told me I have to practice walking, so that someday I can play with the other girls."

"Yes, Miss Emily."

"But you can catch me if I start to fall, like you always do."

"Yes, Miss Emily."

"What would I do without you, Sammy?"

"You would fall, Miss Emily," he answered. Robots are always so damned literal.

And as suddenly as it had appeared, the scene vanished.

"So that was Miss Emily?" I said.

"Yes," said Sammy.

"And you were owned by her parents?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any understanding of the passage of time, Sammy?"

"I can calibrate time to within three nanoseconds of . . ."

"That's not what I asked," I said. "For example, if I told you that scene we just saw happened more than five hundred years ago, what would you say to that?"

"I would ask if you were measuring by Earth years, Galactic Standard years, New Calendar Democracy years. . . ."

"Never mind," I said.

Sammy fell silent and motionless. If someone had stumbled upon him at just that moment, they'd have been hard-pressed to prove that he was still operational.

"What's the matter with him?" asked the Baroni. "His battery can't be drained yet."

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"Of course not. They were designed to work for years without recharging."

And then I knew. He wasn't a farm robot, so he had no urge to get up and start working the fields. He wasn't a mech, so he had no interest in fixing the feeders in the barn. For a moment I thought he might be a butler or a major domo, but if he was, he'd have been trying to learn my desires to serve me, and he obviously wasn't doing that. That left just one thing.

He was a nursemaid.

I shared my conclusion with the Baroni, and he concurred.

"We're looking at a *lot* of money here," I said excitedly. "Think of it—a fully functioning antique robot nursemaid! He can watch the kids while his new owners go rummaging for more old artifacts."

"There's something wrong," said the Baroni, who was never what you could call an optimist.

"The only thing wrong is we don't have enough bags to haul all the money we're going to sell him for."

"Look around you," said the Baroni. "This place was abandoned, and it was never prosperous. If he's that valuable, why did they leave him behind?"

"He's a nursemaid. Probably she outgrew him."

"Better find out." He was back to sentence fragments again.

I shrugged and approached the robot. "Sammy, what did you do at night after Miss Emily went to sleep?"

He came to life again. "I stood by her bed."

"All night, every night?"

"Yes, sir. Unless she woke and requested pain medication, which I would retrieve and bring to her."

"Did she require pain medication very often?" I asked.

"I do not know, sir."

I frowned. "I thought you just said you brought it to her when she needed it."

"No, sir," Sammy corrected me. "I said I brought it to her when she *requested* it."

"She didn't request it very often?"

"Only when the pain became unbearable." Sammy paused. "I do not fully understand the word 'unbearable,' but I know it had a deleterious effect upon her. My Miss Emily was often in pain."

"I'm surprised you understand the word 'pain,'" I said.

"To feel pain is to be non-operational or dysfunctional to some degree."

"Yes, but it's more than that. Didn't Miss Emily ever try to describe it?"

"No," answered Sammy. "She never spoke of her pain."

"Did it bother her less as she grew older and adjusted to her handicap?" I asked.

"No, sir, it did not." He paused. "There are many kinds of dysfunction."

"Are you saying she had other problems, too?" I continued.

Instantly we were looking at another scene from Sammy's past. It was the same girl, now maybe thirteen years old, staring at her face in a mirror. She didn't like what she saw, and neither did I.

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"What *is* that?" I asked, forcing myself not to look away.

"It is a fungus disease," answered Sammy as the girl tried unsuccessfully with cream and powder to cover the ugly blemishes that had spread across her face.

"Is it native to this world?"

"Yes," said Sammy.

"You must have had some pretty ugly people walking around," I said.

"It did not affect most of the colonists. But Miss Emily's immune system was weakened by her other diseases."

"What other diseases?"

Sammy rattled off three or four that I'd never heard of.

"And no one else in her family suffered from them?"

"No, sir."

"It happens in my race, too," offered the Baroni. "Every now and then a genetically inferior specimen is born and grows to maturity."

"She was not genetically inferior," said Sammy.

"Oh?" I said, surprised. It's rare for a robot to contradict a living being, even an alien. "What was she?"

Sammy considered his answer for a moment.

"Perfect," he said at last.

"I'll bet the other kids didn't think so," I said.

"What do they know?" replied Sammy.

And instantly he projected another scene. Now the girl was fully grown, probably about twenty. She kept most of her skin covered, but we could see the ravaging effect her various diseases had had upon her hands and face.

Tears were running down from these beautiful blue eyes over bony, parchment-like cheeks. Her emaciated body was wracked by sobs.

A holograph of a robot's hand popped into existence, and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"Oh, Sammy!" she cried. "I really thought he liked me! He was always so nice to me." She paused for breath as the tears continued unabated. "But I saw his face when I reached out to take his hand, and I felt him shudder when I touched it. All he really felt for me was pity. That's all any of them ever feel!"

"What do they know?" said Sammy's voice, the same words and the same inflections he had just used a moment ago.

"It's not just him," she said. "Even the farm animals run away when I approach them. I don't know how anyone can stand being in the same room with me." She stared at where the robot was standing. "You're all I've got, Sammy. You're my only friend in the whole world. Please don't ever leave me."

"I will never leave you, Miss Emily," said Sammy's voice.

"Promise me."

"I promise," said Sammy.

And then the holograph vanished and Sammy stood mute and motionless again.

"He really cared for her," said the Baroni.

"The boy?" I said. "If he did, he had a funny way of showing it."

"No, of course not the boy. The robot."

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"Come off it," I said. "Robots don't have any feelings."

"You heard him," said the Baroni.

"Those were programmed responses," I said. "He probably has three million to choose from."

"Those are emotions," insisted the Baroni.

"Don't you go getting all soft on me," I said. "Any minute now you'll be telling me he's too human to sell."

"*You* are the human," said the Baroni. "*He* is the one with compassion."

"I've got more compassion than her parents did, letting her grow up like that," I said irritably. I confronted the robot again. "Sammy, why didn't the doctors do anything for her?"

"This was a farming colony," answered Sammy. "There were only 387 families on the entire world. The Democracy sent a doctor once a year at the beginning, and then, when there were less than 100 families left, he stopped coming. The last time Miss Emily saw a doctor was when she was fourteen."

"What about an offworld hospital?" asked the Baroni.

"They had no ship and no money. They moved here in the second year of a seven-year drought. Then various catastrophes wiped out their next six crops. They spent what savings they had on mutated cattle, but the cattle died before they could produce young or milk. One by one all the families began leaving the planet as impoverished wards of the Democracy."

"Including Miss Emily's family?" I asked.

"No. Mother died when Miss Emily was nineteen, and Father died two years later."

Then it was time for me to ask the Baroni's question.

"So when did Miss Emily leave the planet, and why did she leave you behind?"

"She did not leave."

I frowned. "She couldn't have run the farm—not in her condition."

"There was no farm left to run," answered Sammy. "All the crops had died, and without Father there was no one to keep the machines working."

"But she stayed. Why?"

Sammy stared at me for a long moment. It's just as well his face was incapable of expression, because I got the distinct feeling that he thought the question was too simplistic or too stupid to merit an answer. Finally he projected another scene. This time the girl, now a woman approaching thirty, hideous open pustules on her face and neck, was sitting in a crudely crafted hoverchair, obviously too weak to stand any more.

"No!" she rasped bitterly.

"They are your relatives," said Sammy's voice. "And they have a room for you."

"All the more reason to be considerate of them. No one should be forced to associate with me—especially not people who are decent enough to make the offer. We will stay here, by ourselves, on this world, until the end."

"Yes, Miss Emily."

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She turned and stared at where Sammy stood. "You want to tell me to leave, don't you? That if we go to Jefferson IV I will receive medical attention and they will make me well—but you are compelled by your programming not to disobey me. Am I correct?"

"Yes, Miss Emily."

The hint of a smile crossed her ravaged face. "Now you know what pain is."

"It is . . . uncomfortable, Miss Emily."

"You'll learn to live with it," she said. She reached out and patted the robot's leg fondly. "If it's any comfort, I don't know if the medical specialists could have helped me even when I was young. They certainly can't help me now."

"You are still young, Miss Emily."

"Age is relative," she said. "I am so close to the grave I can almost taste the dirt." A metal hand appeared, and she held it in ten incredibly fragile fingers. "Don't feel sorry for me, Sammy. It hasn't been a life I'd wish on anyone else. I won't be sorry to see it end."

"I am a robot," replied Sammy. "I cannot feel sorrow."

"You've no idea how fortunate you are."

I shot the Baroni a triumphant smile that said: *See? Even Sammy admits he can't feel any emotions.*

And he sent back a look that said: *I didn't know until now that robots could lie,* and I knew we still had a problem.

The scene vanished.

"How soon after that did she die?" I asked Sammy.

"Seven months, eighteen days, three hours, and four minutes, sir," was his answer.

"She was very bitter," noted the Baroni.

"She was bitter because she was born, sir," said Sammy. "Not because she was dying."

"Did she lapse into a coma, or was she cogent up to the end?" I asked out of morbid curiosity.

"She was in control of her senses until the moment she died," answered Sammy. "But she could not see for the last eighty-three days of her life. I functioned as her eyes."

"What did she need eyes for?" asked the Baroni. "She had a hoverchair, and it is a single-level house."

"When you are a recluse, you spend your life with books, sir," said Sammy, and I thought: *The mechanical bastard is actually lecturing us!*

With no further warning, he projected a final scene for us.

The woman, her eyes no longer blue, but clouded with cataracts and something else—disease, fungus, who knew?—lay on her bed, her breathing labored.

From Sammy's point of view, we could see not only her, but, much closer, a book of poetry, and then we heard his voice: "Let me read something else, Miss Emily."

"But that is the poem I wish to hear," she whispered. "It is by Edna St. Vincent Millay, and she is my favorite."

"But it is about death," protested Sammy.

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"All life is about death," she replied so softly I could barely hear her. "Surely you know that I am dying, Sammy?"

"I know, Miss Emily," said Sammy.

"I find it comforting that my ugliness did not diminish the beauty around me, that it will remain after I am gone," she said. "Please read."

Sammy read:

"There will be rose and rhododendron
When you are dead and under ground;
Still will be heard from white syringas . . ."

Suddenly the robot's voice fell silent. For a moment I thought there was a flaw in the projection. Then I saw that Miss Emily had died.

He stared at her for a long minute, which means that we did too, and then the scene evaporated.

"I buried her beneath her favorite tree," said Sammy. "But it is no longer there."

"Nothing lasts forever, even trees," said the Baroni. "And it's been five hundred years."

"It does not matter. I know where she is."

He walked us over to a barren spot about thirty yards from the ruin of a farmhouse. On the ground was a stone, and neatly carved into it was the following:

Miss Emily 2298-2331 G.E. There will be rose and rhododendron

"That's lovely, Sammy," said the Baroni.

"It is what she requested."

"What did you do after you buried her?" I asked.

"I went to the barn."

"For how long?"

"With Miss Emily dead, I had no need to stay in the house. I remained in the barn for many years, until my battery power ran out."

"Many years?" I repeated. "What the hell did you do there?"

"Nothing."

"You just stood there?"

"I just stood there."

"Doing nothing?"

"That is correct." He stared at me for a long moment, and I could have sworn he was studying me. Finally he spoke again. "I know that you intend to sell me."

"We'll find you a family with another Miss Emily," I said. *If they're the highest bidder.*

"I do not wish to serve another family. I wish to remain here."

"There's nothing here," I said. "The whole planet's deserted."

"I promised my Miss Emily that I would never leave her."

"But she's dead now," I pointed out.

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"She put no conditions on her request. I put no conditions on my promise."

I looked from Sammy to the Baroni, and decided that this was going to take a couple of mechs—one to carry Sammy to the ship, and one to stop the Baroni from setting him free.

"But if you will honor a single request, I will break my promise to her and come away with you."

Suddenly I felt like I was waiting for the other shoe to drop, and I hadn't heard the first one yet.

"What do you want, Sammy?"

"I told you I did nothing in the barn. That was true. I was incapable of doing what I wanted to do."

"And what was that?"

"I wanted to cry."

I don't know what I was expecting, but that wasn't it.

"Robots don't cry," I said.

"Robots *can't* cry," replied Sammy. "There is a difference."

"And that's what you want?"

"It is what I have wanted ever since my Miss Emily died."

"We rig you to cry, and you agree to come away with us?"

"That is correct," said Sammy.

"Sammy," I said, "you've got yourself a deal."

I contacted the ship, told it to feed Mech Three everything the medical library had on tears and tear ducts, and then send it over. It arrived about ten minutes later, deactivated the robot, and started fussing and fiddling. After about two hours it announced that its work was done, that Sammy now had tear ducts and had been supplied with a solution that could produce six hundred authentic saltwater tears from each eye.

I had Mech Three show me how to activate Sammy, and then sent it back to the ship.

"Have you ever heard of a robot wanting to cry?" I asked the Baroni.

"No."

"Neither have I," I said, vaguely disturbed.

"He loved her."

I didn't even argue this time. I was wondering which was worse, spending thirty years trying to be a normal human being and failing, or spending thirty years trying to cry and failing. None of the other stuff had gotten to me; Sammy was just doing what robots do. It was the thought of his trying so hard to do what robots couldn't do that suddenly made me feel sorry for him. That in turn made me very irritable; ordinarily I don't even feel sorry for Men, let alone machines.

And what he wanted was such a simple thing compared to the grandiose ambitions of my own race. Once Men had wanted to cross the ocean; we crossed it. We'd wanted to fly; we flew. We wanted to reach the stars; we reached them. All Sammy wanted to do was cry over the loss of his Miss Emily. He'd waited half a millennium and had agreed to sell himself into bondage again, just for a few tears.

It was a lousy trade.

I reached out and activated him.

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"Is it done?" asked Sammy.

"Right," I said. "Go ahead and cry your eyes out."

Sammy stared straight ahead. "I can't," he said at last.

"Think of Miss Emily," I suggested. "Think of how much you miss her."

"I feel pain," said Sammy. "But I cannot cry."

"You're sure?"

"I am sure," said Sammy. "I was guilty of having thoughts and longings above my station. Miss Emily used to say that tears come from the heart and the soul. I am a robot. I have no heart and no soul, so I cannot cry, even with the tear ducts you have given me. I am sorry to have wasted your time. A more complex model would have understood its limitations at the outset." He paused, and then turned to me. "I will go with you now."

"Shut up," I said.

He immediately fell silent.

"What is going on?" asked the Baroni.

"You shut up too!" I snapped.

I summoned Mechs Seven and Eight and had them dig Sammy a grave right next to his beloved Miss Emily. It suddenly occurred to me that I didn't even know her full name, that no one who chanced upon her headstone would ever know it. Then I decided that it didn't really matter.

Finally they were done, and it was time to deactivate him.

"I would have kept my word," said Sammy.

"I know," I said.

"I am glad you did not force me to."

I walked him to the side of the grave. "This won't be like your battery running down," I said. "This time it's forever."

"She was not afraid to die," said Sammy. "Why should I be?"

I pulled the plug and had Mechs Seven and Eight lower him into the ground. They started filling in the dirt while I went back to the ship to do one last thing. When they were finished I had Mech Seven carry my handiwork back to Sammy's grave.

"A tombstone for a robot?" asked the Baroni.

"Why not?" I replied. "There are worse traits than honesty and loyalty." I should know: I've stockpiled enough of them.

"He truly moved you."

Seeing the man you could have been will do that to you, even if he's all metal and silicone and prismatic eyes.

"What does it say?" asked the Baroni as we finished planting the tombstone.

I stood aside so he could read it:

"Sammy"
Australopithicus Robotus

"That is very moving."

"It's no big deal," I said uncomfortably. "It's just a tombstone."

"It is also inaccurate," observed the Baroni.

"He was a better man than I am."

"He was not a man at all."

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"Fuck you."

The Baroni doesn't know what it means, but he knows it's an insult, so he came right back at me like he always does. "You realize, of course, that you have buried our profit?"

I wasn't in the mood for his notion of wit. "Find out what he was worth, and I'll pay you for your half," I replied. "Complain about it again, and I'll knock your alien teeth down your alien throat."

He stared at me. "I will never understand Men," he said.

All that happened twenty years ago. Of course the Baroni never asked for his half of the money, and I never offered it to him again. We're still partners. Inertia, I suppose.

I still think about Sammy from time to time. Not as much as I used to, but every now and then.

I know there are preachers and ministers who would say he was just a machine, and to think of him otherwise is blasphemous, or at least wrong-headed, and maybe they're right. Hell, I don't even know if there's a God at all—but if there is, I like to think He's the God of *all* us Australopithicines.

Including Sammy. ❍

PS FORM 3526: STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION

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SUNSPOTS

Since the sunspots began,
my computer keeps creating
Petrarchan sonnets to a lady
named Penelope Teim, while
ignoring my commands,

my telephone keeps
answering itself, often quite
rudely, then randomly placing
long distance calls and hanging
up when someone answers,

my TV thinks it's a
radio, and my radio a TV, their
audio broadcast signals crossed,
while all video feeds come
in as blank blue screen,

and my cat has given
up catnaps, too involved now
in constructing a primitive hovel
out of various objects found
laying about the house.

I assume everything
will return to normal in time.
Until then, I'll just sit back and
enjoy the satellite TV beaming into
my head, and munch on another
bag of microwave popcorn
hot from the fridge.

—G.O. Clark

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CURING AGENT

Don D'Ammassa

Don D'Ammassa is the author of *Servants of Chaos* (Leisure, 2002) and *Blood Beast* (Pinnacle, 1988), as well as over one hundred short stories. He has been a book reviewer for the *Science Fiction Chronicle* for almost twenty years and has been nominated for the Hugo award four times for his amateur magazine, *Mythologies.* He lives in Rhode Island with his wife Sheila, two cats, sixty thousand books, and two thousand movies, and is currently writing full time.

Morocco didn't seem a likely place to find a miracle cure, and that first night, Masterson wondered if he was wasting what little time remained to him.

When he'd arrived in Rabat, he'd been vaguely disappointed to discover that the capital city of Morocco was almost indistinguishable from those of southern Spain or France. The flags were different and the buildings weren't quite as tall, but most of the population had adopted western dress, and he'd seen almost as large a proportion of veiled women in the streets of Madrid as he had during the cab ride from the airport.

The hotel clerk had welcomed him to Al Maghrib rather than Morocco, but otherwise had spoken nearly accent-free English. The accommodations were slightly old-fashioned, but clean and comfortable, and he'd eaten a quite excellent fish dinner at the hotel's restaurant. The walls were covered with posters advertising the romantic splendors of Marrakech and Casablanca, the latter of which had just opened a Humphrey Bogart-based theme park, but Masterson wasn't in Africa for entertainment.

The virulent, mutated cancer in his body was spreading quickly. Implants could retard its advance for a few weeks, perhaps even a few months, but they were fighting a desperate rearguard action against an implacable enemy.

Hakim Rashid had met him for breakfast the following morning. Over spiced tea and breaded fish, he produced a series of maps, tickets, and other documents designed to speed Masterson on his journey. Both men

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spoke Arabic, but Rashid's Berber accent sometimes confused Masterson, who was forced to ask him to repeat himself more than once. When they were done, money changed hands and the two half-bowed to one another, then Rashid disappeared into the street while Masterson collected his one suitcase and checked out of his room.

The journey that followed was loud and dirty most of the time, and tedious throughout. He traveled by rail to Azrou in relative comfort, although there were two significant delays because of obstructions on the tracks. At Azrou, he transferred to another line and found himself standing in a space crowded well beyond capacity, the railcar itself sandwiched between cargo carriers filled with iron ore and manganese from the north. There had been a series of major earthquakes earlier in the year, and the mines had been closed for a long time, seriously impacting Morocco's balance of trade.

At Khenifra, he changed modes and actually managed to sit down on the bus as far as Ben Mela, but he surrendered his seat to a pregnant woman for the balance of the journey to Azilal. There was supposed to be a car waiting for him there, but the agent's office was closed and dark. Masterson inquired at the leather shop to the left and the pottery maker to the right, but either his Arabic was less fluent than he had thought or they simply chose not to understand the impatient foreigner. He wanted a drink badly, but alcohol was only sold openly in the tourist centers, which this decidedly was not, so he made do with a cool but not cold citrus concoction hawked by a young woman who stood hunched over because of an enormous wen on the side of her neck.

The agent showed up two hours later, relaxed and unconcerned. Masterson knew better than to let his anger show, even when the rental fee turned out to be 20 percent higher than he'd been quoted. Money was the least of his worries. To his surprise, the vehicle was only three years old, a rugged Eurojeep Land Rover that looked to have been well-maintained. He returned to the office to demand a full tank of fuel, not because he had already paid for it, but simply because he didn't want to be stranded somewhere between Azilal and Quarzazate. The agent blamed the problem on his unreliable and probably nonexistent assistant, and, a few minutes later, stood waving as Masterson pulled away in a cloud of flying sand.

It was a track rather than a road, sometimes so windblown that he was afraid he was drifting off his route and would end up lost in the desert. Twice he passed the rusting hulks of tanks, one Moroccan and one Algerian, relics of the war for Western Sahara back in 2009. UN peacekeepers were still stationed in the disputed territory, but the turmoil following the drought in 2010 and the overthrow of King Mohamed VII the following year had given Moroccans other matters to occupy their minds. The Algerians had reverted to their own civil war now and no longer had leisure to cause trouble outside their borders.

There was a hotel of sorts in Quarzazate, but when he saw the condition of its exterior, Masterson felt no temptation to go inside. In the rear of the Land Rover lay a bundled tent and other gear, along with enough food and fresh water to last him two full weeks. He refueled before leav-

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ing town, while two barefooted boys about ten years old stared at him with impossibly wide eyes, and a wizened old woman stood under a ragged awning, muttering angrily under her breath and watching him suspiciously.

He'd thought the road from Azilal was primitive, but the next leg of his journey was even worse. The Land Rover bucked and tossed, its suspension complaining loudly, and, unless he ran the wipers, a fine red sand covered his windshield. A scratchy soundtrack accompanied him from that point onward. When the sun started to go down, he reluctantly pulled into the hollow between two hills for the night. His implants must have been silently active, however, because he felt unusually weak when he stepped out of the Land Rover, and he ended up sleeping sprawled across the seats, too tired to set up the tent.

Early the next morning, he saw the low buildings of the town of Tuvaresh, nestled up against the side of a low hill.

When his doctors first delivered their pessimistic diagnosis, Masterson had refused to accept it. "You must face the inevitable," insisted one specialist after another. "It is almost unheard of for anyone to survive once it has spread this far."

Masterson snatched hold of the word "almost" and demanded clarification. He learned that only six people were known to have survived an advanced case of Glastonbury's Disease since its identification in 2005. Two had been young children whose immune systems had been strong enough to win the battle, although at the cost of years spent on life support. "The techniques that were used in their cases would be incompatible with an adult. Mature organisms are tougher but less flexible." Of the remaining four, two had subsequently died of unrelated causes, and two were still alive, but neither of them would speak to Masterson, nor was there any record of their having been treated by any known medical facility between their final diagnosis and subsequent miraculous cure.

"They must have been spontaneous recoveries," suggested yet another specialist. "I admit it would be unusually extraordinary in these instances, but as you can see from the dossiers we've prepared, all four terminated active treatment prior to remission. The human body still holds surprises for us, Mr. Masterson, but it would be disingenuous of me to suggest that your prognosis is anything less than grim."

Dissatisfied, refusing to accept that his future was in the hands of blind fate, Masterson had used part of his fortune to buy information that he felt should have been offered freely. Within weeks, he had accumulated more information about the four survivors than they probably knew or had known about themselves. Human investigators and artificial intelligence programs sifted through the data, searching for patterns, commonalities, and found several, the most interesting of which was that all four had visited Morocco at least once in the months preceding their extraordinary recovery. The first two cases were unremarkable in that regard; one had been a Moroccan national working in the embassy in Washington, and the other was a Spanish military officer who had been stationed in one of the coastal enclaves still administered by Madrid. The latter had recently died in an air crash.

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Masterson searched for more linkages and found them. The Spaniard had twice visited the small village north of Naples where little Maria Tomassi, survivor number three, lay on what was supposed to have been her deathbed. Her family had taken the terminally ill nine-year-old with them on an unlikely trip to Morocco between those two visits, after which she had recovered her full health. He had yet to find proof of a direct link to the fourth survivor, the wife of a Jordanian translator who had worked at the United Nations for two years, but the Moroccan diplomat might well have known the couple socially if not professionally. She had refused his request for an interview, and the Tomassi girl and her family had all perished when their village was virtually swallowed by an earthquake.

It had proven more difficult to track movement inside Morocco, particularly since more than a year had passed between each set of visits. Although the major cities of North Africa had all become reasonably cosmopolitan, the system broke down quickly as one moved into the interior. Two of the four subjects had visited Marrakech, and all had stayed in Rabat for at least one night. Hotel reservations and credit card payments had been saved electronically and were therefore available to be clandestinely retrieved and analyzed. In the interior, though, records were generally hand-written, if they existed at all. Masterson liquidated more of his assets, and his hirelings spread out into the desert villages, seeking information. As his days of comparative comfort dwindled toward their ultimate end, Masterson teetered on the brink of despair, and was contemplating suicide when he had finally received a report that held promise.

All four had visited the same nondescript southern village.

He passed several pedestrians as he slowly advanced into the town. Most of them glanced disinterestedly in his direction, a few waved angry fists at the dust he stirred. Tuvaresh was a backwater community, existing precariously on what it could farm from the reluctant soil or fashion by hand from crude raw materials. Masterson's spies had told him that there was no local gendarmerie. If the police were needed, there were radios in the village by which they could be summoned, although that didn't necessarily mean they'd actually make an appearance. There was no hospital, just a medical station with a single physician, a local man who'd been trained in Europe but who had turned down a position in Rabat in order to return to his home.

Masterson drove around the perimeter of the village until a hill blocked his way, so that he had a good idea of its general layout, then retraced his path to a small, open plateau and parked the Land Rover in plain view just above the marketplace. He locked the doors and set the alarms and electronic wards, making sure that the young boys who watched him saw what he was doing, as well as the revolver he slipped into his jacket pocket.

The market was a study in contrasts. Much of it was straight out of a travelogue, booths whose owners hawked colorful swathes of cloth or wood carvings or pottery or some form of food or drink. Most seemed very traditional, as though they had been swept forward from centuries in the past. But there were others with a distinctively modern aura. Portable

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electric generators hummed or spluttered beside some of these, where customers could choose from a variety of electronic games, pirated western videos or music CDs, or connect to the internet via radio to look at pornographic images.

It only took a few minutes to walk through the market, and he saw nothing of particular interest. He tried his Arabic on a young girl, who either couldn't understand him or was too shy to answer, then bought some fruit from one of the vendors, who stared at him with open curiosity. "Can you tell me where I could find Dr. Massoud?" he asked, speaking slowly.

The merchant, a thin but robust-looking man of middle age, nodded slowly. "Two streets past the mechanic's shop, monsieur," he replied in passable French, obviously mistaking Masterson's nationality. "There is a red crescent over the door."

Masterson thanked him and returned to the Land Rover, which had been left undisturbed, although there were now nearly a dozen youngsters sitting or standing about. Masterson realized that he hadn't been approached by any of them for a handout yet, which was most unusual. They watched as he disabled the anti-theft field, and showed neither pleasure nor disappointment when he drove away.

He found the clinic with no difficulty, and parked in front of it. This was the outer limit of the village, and, in fact, the clinic was built up against and partly into the side of the same hill that had blocked his way earlier. It was in somewhat better condition than the rest of the buildings in town, but that was far from a testimonial. The roof looked new and tight, the shutters for the windows were modern and in good condition, and an electrical generator purred quietly in a prefabricated metal shed to one side, but the stucco walls were pitted and crumbling in spots, and there were irregular stains that vaguely suggested thunderclouds. A small electric lamp had been installed over the door, and there was a lighter glow from inside, obscured by gauzy curtains.

Since there was no bell, Masterson knocked, wondering if he should just open the door and walk in.

He was about to do just that when he heard a sound from within, and, a moment later, the door swung away to reveal a cadaverously tall man with a long, gray beard, wearing a western style flannel shirt that clashed incongruously with his baggy silk trousers.

Masterson got a quick once-over, and then the man addressed him in Spanish. "May I help you, Señor?"

"I'm looking for Dr. Massoud," he replied in Arabic. "And I'm not Spanish. My name is Carl Masterson and I'm from America." The Spanish were none too popular in Morocco at the moment, because of their intransigence about surrendering their last few small enclaves on the mainland as well as a handful of islands in the Mediterranean.

"I am Massoud." The man's expression remained wary, but was a trifle less unfriendly. "Are you in need of medical help?"

"Yes I am. May I come inside?"

"Be welcome, then." Massoud stepped back and Masterson entered the clinic.

Contrary to his expectations, the clinic appeared to be empty except for

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Massoud himself. It wasn't just that there were no other staff or patients, but rather a pervasive sense of neglect. The beds were bare, no sheets or other coverings, all of the medical instruments were apparently shut away, and in general, things were dusty, but otherwise remarkably well maintained and tidy. It was possible that he'd come at just the right time, when no one was ill enough to be in the clinic, but when he thought about it, he realized that all of the inhabitants of Tuvaresh whom he had seen so far appeared to be healthy—which had not been true of the other towns and villages through which he'd passed. Nor had he noticed any street beggars, neither elderly unemployables nor children deliberately mutilated by their parents to make their appeals more compelling. In Tuvaresh, people might have tightened their belts because of the poor economic conditions that prevailed in North Africa, but they were free of the endemic diseases that troubled their neighbors. Realizing that, Masterson felt his first rush of optimism since deplaning in Rabat.

He was ushered into a small, dimly lit office that didn't look particularly welcoming, although at least here there were some personal touches that indicated human habitation. Massoud waited until he had settled onto an unbalanced wooden chair before speaking.

"In what way may I be of assistance?"

"I have an advanced case of Glastonbury's Disease. It's a new form of cancer in which . . ."

Massoud waved his hand impatiently. "We're not so isolated here that I haven't kept up with things in my profession. You have my profound sympathies, Mr. Masterson, but surely you realize that there is nothing that I can do for you here. Perhaps in Rabat? There is a fine hospital there, one of the best on the continent."

"I'm not interested in conventional hospitals, Dr. Massoud. They've already failed me. Your services were recommended to me by Sarina Farouk. I believe you treated her for the very same condition just a few months ago."

Massoud blinked, but his face remained immobile. "I am afraid you are mistaken, Mr. Masterson. There is no one in Tuvaresh of that name, and I have not traveled further than Taroudant in over a year, and that was to visit relatives."

"I know she doesn't live here, but she came to this clinic last November. She was in the terminal stages when she arrived, but shortly after her return to Cairo, she made a complete recovery."

"Allah smiled upon her, no doubt. It is entirely possible that this woman visited Tuvaresh, as you have indicated, although few have any reason to come to such a remote place. But I assure you that I did not treat this woman—an Egyptian, I assume—for any condition whatsoever, let alone so serious an ailment." He made an elaborate gesture to indicate his surroundings. "Surely you can see that we are a poor community with only the most basic facilities. I cannot imagine why this woman would send you to us."

"She was quite explicit," he answered firmly. He was willing to pay a very large bribe to get what he wanted, enough, in truth, to substantially raise the standard of living for the entire community . . . but none of the

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four survivors had been remotely wealthy. Masterson was sure that this was one of those few things he'd wanted in life that he couldn't buy. At least not directly. "And I'm quite desperate."

"As I have already said, I am very sympathetic, but there is nothing I can do for you. It is out of my hands." He held up his palms with fingers spread to illustrate his words.

"Then perhaps someone else?"

"Not in Tuvaresh, Mr. Masterson. It will serve no purpose for you to remain here." He rose to his feet, an obvious gesture of dismissal. "I can offer you something for the pain if necessary, but beyond that, I am powerless."

"I've had blockers implanted," Masterson said impatiently as he stood up. "I need a cure, not a palliative."

"You will not find it here."

"Perhaps not. Thank you for your time, Dr. Massoud."

Masterson set up camp back where he'd first parked. The rear of the Land Rover unfolded into a small sleeping compartment. He didn't bother to start the generator for the air conditioning, but he was fastidious enough to assemble the chemical toilet rather than use the communal facilities at the corner of the market square. A handful of young boys watched him, but lost interest once it was obvious that no new wonders were to be revealed.

He spent that evening walking around the small village, speaking casually to anyone who seemed willing to tolerate the presence of a foreigner. Many moved away without responding to his greetings, but others were curious and willing to talk, particularly once he'd made it clear he was not French, and, even better, not Spanish. He was careful not to mention his illness or his reason for being in Tuvaresh. It was difficult to resist the temptation to probe for information, but Masterson had amassed his fortune because he was patient and methodical, and he would not allow even the threat of imminent death to deprive him of his best weapons.

But by the afternoon of the following day, the sense of urgency had begun to gnaw at him, and he found it increasingly difficult to ask insincere questions about an artisan's methods or to sympathize with an ex-soldier's tirades against the Spanish. He started to drop hints about the real purpose of his visit, watching to see if anyone would react. To his surprise, they all did. Adults and children alike, they became cool and distant, and sometimes visibly disturbed, when he mentioned that he had come to Tuvaresh seeking treatment for his illness. He had thought that someone locally was concealing a miraculous secret; he hadn't anticipated that it might be the entire community.

As his questions became more insistent, the responses grew less friendly. No one threatened him, no one shouted angrily, but, by the third day, he was clearly unwelcome. The merchants in the market would sell to him, but they made no effort to entice him with their wares, and their haggling was perfunctory. Some of the children were actively afraid of him.

Masterson had learned the name of the village's folk healer before his current ostracism, and knew that she was held in at least as high regard as Dr. Massoud. On the third evening, she returned to Tuvaresh, riding

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in the oxcart beside her two grandchildren, a boy and a girl, both in their early teens. Rhaliyah sold charms and herbal cures and dispensed advice, and was certainly a figure of more authority than the town's ostensible administrator, Mohammed Bin Dayoud, an overweight, elderly man whose waist-length beard was so full of sand fleas that it sometimes seemed to move of its own accord.

He waited until late in the evening before visiting her, rapping lightly on the door of her small house. An impudent wind had sprung up, and he kept his face averted. He had just raised his hand to knock again when the door opened.

"Come in, Señor Masterson. I have been expecting you."

He brushed sand from his clothing and stamped his feet before stepping inside. The interior was relatively dark, lit only by a pair of small oil lamps, but it looked to be surprisingly clean and orderly. There were piles of cushions scattered about the room, but no chairs, and the door leading to the rest of the house was covered by a beaded curtain.

He apologized in Arabic for intruding, but she continued to speak in Spanish throughout his visit, perhaps as a sign of distrust. Masterson launched into essentially the same story he'd used with Massoud, but Rhaliyah cut him off quickly.

"I know why you are here and what you seek. You are wasting your time. You should not have come. There is nothing here for you. We cannot help you. It is best that you go home. Stay with those you love for as much time as remains to you."

"I can't do that." He was silent for a few seconds, having realized that he'd misjudged the situation. "I will do whatever is necessary to find the answer. I am a wealthy man. I could help you, or your people."

She shook her head. "We are content with what we have. Allah provides. What you seek is beyond our power to give, even if we wanted your wealth. Go home, Señor Masterson. There is no help for you in Tuvaresh."

Masterson sighed and reached into the pocket of his jacket, removed the revolver without pointing it at the woman, but making certain that she could tell what it was. "I am dying, old woman. I will do whatever it takes to save my own life."

Neither her expression nor the tone of her voice changed in the slightest. "I am too old to fear death, and I could not help you even if I did. So do what you wish and leave, for I have had a tiring journey and I wish to rest now, in one fashion or another."

His hand tightened around the grip of the revolver, but he'd sat through enough board meetings to recognize her determination. The revolver went back into his pocket, and he left without another word.

Masterson spent the next day wandering the streets as before. The adults continued to avoid him, as did most of the children, but he brought gifts with him this time, a bagful of treats including handheld computer games he'd bought for an exorbitant price in the market square, chocolate bars from his refrigerated larder in the Land Rover, a few other items he'd selected from among his equipment. The girls and older boys were still wary, but some of the younger ones surrendered to temptation and

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let themselves be approached. Masterson carefully avoided saying anything that might alarm them, asked instead about Rhaliyah and her family, and by early afternoon he had the information he sought.

He returned to his encampment and took a long and refreshing nap. It was going to be a busy night.

It took longer for Rhaliyah to respond when he knocked this time, and he thought that she looked surprised as well. She did not invite him in until he asked to speak to her, and then did so grudgingly. The room looked exactly as it had the night before.

"You have not taken my advice." Tonight she was speaking in Arabic.

"I told you. I'm desperate. I have no other place to go."

"And I have told you that I am unable to help you."

"Unable? Or unwilling?"

"Does it matter?" Her expression puzzled him. Was it contempt that he saw, or anger, or fear, or actually sympathy? It seemed to him an amalgam of them all, but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered except escaping the trap that resided inside his body.

"I want to show you something. I think it might convince you to help me." His hand slipped into his jacket pocket.

Her eyes widened slightly, and he realized that she thought he was going to threaten her with his revolver again. But his fingers slid past the cold metal and gripped something else. He handed it to her.

Rhaliyah accepted it reluctantly and squinted to see the details of the photograph in the poor light.

"Alina," she whispered.

"Yes," he said quietly. "That's your granddaughter. Don't worry, she's a bit uncomfortable and very frightened, but she's not in any immediate danger. I've locked the rover and set up the defensive field. Anyone who tries to get in will get a painful electric shock unless they have this." From his other pocket, he withdrew the control wand.

"You should not have done this." Her voice was still pitched low, but he heard anger in it now, and a threat.

"This is actually a very sophisticated device." He tossed the wand up into the air and caught it. "That bundle between her legs is a bomb." Her head jerked and he spoke quickly. "Don't worry. Unless it's disturbed, it won't go off for almost twenty-four hours. Plenty of time to disarm it." He held up the wand. "I just need to key in the right code and touch the transmit key."

"She is only thirteen, Mr. Masterson. She has her entire life in front of her."

His own voice hardened. "And all of this wouldn't be necessary if *I* had more life in front of *me*. I don't want to hurt anybody, but believe me, I have nothing to lose. If it takes a death to bring me life, then that's an arrangement I'm willing to make. I'll kill your granddaughter, and you, and everyone else in Tuvaresh if necessary, until one of you gives me what I want. Life from death; it has a kind of poetic balance."

"Flies from a corpse," she responded.

"Remember, it will be your *granddaughter's* corpse. And before you de-

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cide to try anything, the defensive field is tied into the bomb as well. I'm the only one who can save her." He leaned forward. "Or perhaps I should say that *you and I* are the only ones who can save her."

She didn't argue any further, and Masterson decided that he was glad that she wasn't working for one of his competitors. Rhaliyah knew when to fight and when to surrender. She wrapped herself in a cloak without saying another word, and gestured for him to open the door. A moment later, they were out under the stars.

Much to his surprise, she led him directly to Dr. Massoud's clinic. She opened the door without knocking and disappeared inside with a perfunctory glance back over her shoulder to see if he was following. Masterson kept his hand in his pocket, fingers curled around the revolver, and cautiously entered.

A flickering fluorescent light from another room was the only illumination. Rhaliyah moved through the darkness with easy familiarity, but Masterson bumped his hip on the side of a gurney and cursed softly. Her voice seemed unnaturally loud when she called out. "Ebiran, we have a visitor."

There was no answer, and she continued through the next room, then turned left into a narrow corridor. Masterson's nerves were taut, but he told himself not to be foolish. He was in command here; he had his weapon *and* the girl.

At the end of the corridor were three doors, and Rhaliyah paused, then produced a key from somewhere within her clothing. She used it to open the middle door and led the way inside. Masterson hesitated, blinking to let his eyes adjust to the dim light.

He stepped forward into a fairly large room that incongruously mixed the modern and the ancient. There were two small computers at matching desks to his right, not state-of-the-art, but clearly operational. A row of filing cabinets extended away on his left and a table and four chairs sat in the center of the room. The far wall was completely covered by three tapestries, and there was another to his immediate right. They were in good repair, but looked to be very old. Rough cushions were also scattered across the floor.

Masterson stepped forward and slipped the revolver out of his pocket. "All right, it's time for an explanation."

Rhaliyah smiled unpleasantly and her eyes flicked to one side. It wasn't quite enough of a warning. He heard the tapestry move behind him and half turned, then felt something hard pressing against the small of his back.

"Please drop your weapon, Mr. Masterson. I would regret having to shoot you, but I will not hesitate if you disobey." It was Massoud's voice, and he was speaking nearly flawless English.

Masterson did as he was told.

"Take a seat, if you will. And no sudden or unexpected movements, please."

He walked slowly to the nearest chair and turned to face the doctor. "I told you I was desperate," he said simply.

"And I told *you* that I could not help you." Massoud sighed. "Now I shall have to radio for the gendarmes."

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"There is more," interjected Rhaliyah, speaking Arabic. "He has Alina." She explained quickly about the bomb.

Massoud's expression darkened. "You are not an honorable man, Mr. Masterson, but I will bargain with you. Release the girl, and we shall forget what has happened this evening."

Masterson smiled and crossed his legs. "You know what I want, Doctor. It's the only thing you have to offer me. Heal me, or the girl dies."

Massoud sighed. "I could kill you where you sit and take the device from your pocket."

"Without the code, she will certainly die. I'm a dead man in any case without your secret, so it does no good to threaten me."

Massoud and Rhaliyah exchanged a few quick sentences that Masterson couldn't follow, apparently in some Berber dialect. It bothered Masterson not to know what was happening, but only a little. He still held all the trump cards.

Their conference ended, Massoud seemed more saddened than angry. "All right, Mr. Masterson. We can tell you what you want to know in exchange for the girl's life, but it will still do you no good. That is beyond our power."

He hesitated only a second. "I'll take that chance. I don't have any other options left to me."

Massoud had entered the room through a doorway concealed by a small tapestry. Now he lifted aside another, revealing a much wider passageway that immediately angled steeply down. With a gas lantern in one hand, Rhaliyah led the way, Masterson following close behind, Massoud bringing up the rear with his weapon pointed directly at the center of Masterson's back.

It wasn't a long descent. The floor of the earthen tunnel was hard packed, as though it had seen a great deal of traffic. After a hundred steps, it leveled off for half that distance, then ended at what appeared to be a solid wall. The wall was dark and oddly textured, and it wasn't until Masterson was within reach of it that he realized it was some form of metal.

"Please use caution. There are sharp edges." Massound was close behind him.

After another few paces, Masterson saw what he was referring to. Part of the metal wall had been ruptured, and the metal had split along jagged lines. Rhaliyah was already gingerly climbing through the rent.

"What is this thing?" Masterson tried to estimate its size, but there wasn't enough light to see how far it extended.

"A messenger from Allah, bearing a gift for the people of Tuvaresh," answered Rhaliyah.

Masterson noticed a faint glow as he negotiated the tight, ragged passage, a glow that seemed to strengthen with each passing second. At first, he thought that his eyes were adjusting, but then he realized that large sections of the walls around him were lightening, as if responding to the comparatively weak glow from the lantern. In less than a minute, the entire chamber was illuminated, and Rhaliyah set the gas lamp down.

The walls were metallic, inset with what appeared to be scores of small instruments or displays, none active insofar as he could determine. There

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were strange symbols inscribed in various places, but he didn't think they were Arabic.

"Is this what I think it is?" He wasn't sure whom he was asking, but Massoud answered.

"Yes, a voyager from another world."

"A goddamned flying saucer!"

Massoud gave a thin chuckle. "More like a flying sausage, I think; although we cannot tell for certain. Most of the forward compartments were crushed and buried. It is only the rear portions of the vessel that were not destroyed."

Masterson felt a sudden, immense sense of satisfaction. "And you found something here, something that cures people."

"It is better that you see the Healer for yourself. Please follow Rhali-yah."

The passageway to the next compartment had been twisted by the impact, but remained otherwise intact. They continued until they reached the next compartment. There had probably been a hatch or doorway here at some point, but it was missing now. They stepped through into a much larger, almost spherical, space, and Masterson saw something moving on the opposite side, something alive.

It looked like a cross between a spider and an octopus and it was enormous, its body spread across a third of the chamber's inner walls. There was a bulbous shape up near the ceiling with dark markings that might have been some kind of sensory organs. Gelatinous extrusions spread from below its mantle, covering a significant portion of the wall, and dozens of impossibly thin legs or tentacles or something like a hybrid of the two were busily moving back and forth across the body, performing enigmatic tasks. A portion of the chamber wall had been torn open, split into a wide grin, and tuberous appendages snaked down to that area and disappeared into the packed earth like questing roots.

"What is it doing?" Masterson watched the constant movement as though hypnotized.

"The Healer is healing itself." Massoud stepped away from him, but kept the weapon pointed in Masterson's direction. "You see before you the most precious secret of our people."

"I don't understand."

"The Healer was the only survivor, or perhaps the only passenger. I am not sure that it is even intelligent in any human way. It may have been the ship's physician, or perhaps it is just an organic machine designed to cure illnesses." Massoud shrugged his shoulders. "It does not matter. The people of Tuvaresh have concealed its existence for generations. We extract certain fluids from its body, the Tears of the Healer, and use them medicinally. They help with both infectious diseases and physical trauma."

Masterson nodded. "I could pay you for enough to cure my cancer. I could pay you very well, enough to help everyone in the village."

Massoud shook his head, and his gun hand wavered as well. "If the people of Tuvaresh were suddenly to become wealthy, questions would be asked. People would come, and eventually they might discover our secret and take it away. If the authorities in Rabat knew of this," he gestured toward the pulsing body of the alien creature, "do you think they would al-

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low us to *keep* it here? It is a great gift Allah has given to the Tuvareshi, and we will protect it as well as honor it."

"Then we're back to trading a life for a life. Mine for Alina's."

Rhaliyah's breath was a hiss and Massoud sounded immensely sad. "I have told you, we cannot help. The Tears might prolong your life a short while, but they will not cure the cancer. For that, you would need the Embrace." Massoud looked suddenly uncertain and Masterson realized he was upset to have revealed so much. He might otherwise have traded the Tears for the girl's life.

"Dr. Massoud, I know that you can cure Glastonbury's. I regret putting the child's life at risk, but I will do whatever I have to do in order to survive."

"Can you come back in six months?" Massoud sounded suddenly tired.

"I will be dead by then, and you know it."

"Yes, and I am powerless to prevent it. Look." Massoud walked closer to the alien and Masterson followed him, suppressing a wave of revulsion as he saw in closer detail the way its living flesh seemed to swarm with interior life. The doctor pointed to a shallow depression carved into the wall of the ship. Pulsing, dripping flesh had grown down to cover the upper third of the declivity, and that portion of its body seemed to have taken on a different texture, becoming fibrous, almost matted.

"What is this?" asked Masterson.

"We call it the Embrace. Only the most desperately ill receive this gift. They are placed in the Embrace for the space of one night, their bodies are united with the Healer, and in the morning they are whole again."

"Then all I have to do is lie in this thing for a few hours and the cancer is gone?"

"Yes, but it is impossible now. You can see that barely a third of the surface is covered. The Healer must be complete in order to perform its miracle, and you are six months too soon for that. It takes more than a year after each treatment before it is ready for another. You see, Mr. Masterson, even if I wished to help you, I am powerless to do so."

There was a long silence before Rhaliyah spoke.

"The girl, Mr. Masterson. Let us save the girl."

Absently, he pulled the control device from his pocket and tossed it to her. "Here. It doesn't matter. I'm not the monster you think. There's no bomb. I certainly wasn't going to blow up my only transportation out of here."

Rhaliyah gave him a look of mixed pity and contempt and started toward the exit. Massoud glanced after her, and let his arm drop to his side. Masterson didn't hesitate for a second. He drew his second weapon and shot Massoud in the middle of the chest. His second shot hit Rhaliyah in the back of the head; she fell to the floor and never moved again.

"It may not be much of a chance," he said quietly, "but it's better than no chance at all."

He should have waited until he'd extracted more details, but he was afraid that Rhaliyah would send for reinforcements, and that had forced his hand. The prospect of immersing himself even partially in the viscous muck of the Healer's body revolted him, but he was prepared to experience far worse if necessary. After stripping off all of his clothing, he

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climbed down into the depression, lying back slowly until his head, and shoulders were pressed against the alien flesh. It was warmer than he'd expected, and itched a little, but then a sense of well-being began to spread through his shoulders, and he felt immensely weary, closed his eyes, and drifted off to sleep.

Masterson woke suddenly and without disorientation, but feeling an unprecedented lassitude. Everything that had happened was clear in his memory, and he could still feel a faint warmth at the back of his neck and across his shoulders. His fingers and toes tingled, and when he couldn't move any of his limbs, he wondered if he was paralyzed. For a split-second, there was the acid taste of panic at the back of his mouth, but then a wave of well-being neutralized it, and he felt relaxed again.

I just have to wait until the process is over, he told himself.

He dozed for a while, occasionally opening his eyes and letting them wander around the chamber. Time passed, but he had no way to measure it. Nothing changed, not even the pattern of light and shadow. Was it day now outside? Or still night? He had no way of knowing.

And then he opened his eyes and saw another face.

It was Dr. Massoud, looking pale and strained. The front of his shirt was dark where blood had dried. I shot him, Masterson told himself. He should be dead, or at least too badly injured to be up and about. This anomaly puzzled him without bringing any distress. Masterson tried to sink back into sleep, but an incessant buzzing disturbed him, a sound that eventually resolved itself into a voice. Massoud was talking to him.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Masterson?"

Masterson thought that he might be able to talk. Experimentally, he opened his mouth and tried. He very distinctly heard the word "Yes," but it didn't sound like his voice. It was very thin and high pitched, and it trembled.

Massoud's face changed, relaxing slightly. "Very good. You have survived, despite my expectations, Mr. Masterson. And I have survived despite yours, no doubt." He looked down at his chest. "Your aim was poor or I would be dead. As it is, I am only experiencing a great deal of pain. The healer's blood will speed my recovery, but I still face several days of discomfort." His face hardened. "Rhaliyah was not so fortunate."

Masterson tried to lift an arm, aware that he was at the mercy of a man he'd just tried to kill, but he couldn't summon the necessary strength, and almost immediately felt that it wasn't worth the effort. The anxiety was still there; he could feel it. But whenever he slipped toward panic, something yanked him back.

"I have some good news for you, Mr. Masterson. The Healer has managed to rid your body of the cancer after all." He laughed unpleasantly, and came closer, lowering his face to within inches of Masterson's. "I admit that I am quite surprised. The process is even more sophisticated than I had imagined. Since it lacked the resources to effect a cure in its usual fashion, it improvised." He leaned back. "Of course, that required some sacrifices. Wait, I'll show you. I think you'll be quite excited."

Massoud was gone for some undetermined period of time, and Master-

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son had almost lapsed back into unconsciousness when he returned. "I think I can manage something more satisfactory on a long-term basis, but for the moment at least, this is the best I can do. It should prove adequate." He raised his hand, and Masterson saw that it held a sheet of thin metal, polished mirror smooth. His face was a blurry reflection, and he squinted, trying to focus his eyes.

"I believe that when the Healer realized that it was unable to heal your entire body, it identified and isolated the most vital portions, and sacrificed the rest."

The image became clearer, and Masterson saw at last why he could not move his arms. His body was only intact from chest level up. Below that, his exposed organs were encased in a transparent sheath that expanded and contracted in place of his missing lungs. His arms and legs were gone, along with his entire skeleton below the heart.

Massoud put his face in front of Masterson's again. "Your body appears to be self-contained. I wonder if it will be able to survive outside the Embrace?" He smiled warmly. "Let's find out, shall we?"

And he reached out toward Masterson. ❍

The 2003 ISAAC ASIMOV AWARD

(Continued from page 11)

or college are eligible. Stories must be in English, and should run from 1,000 to 10,000 words. No submission can be returned, and all stories must be previously unpublished and unsold. There is a $10 entry fee, with up to three stories accepted for each fee paid. Checks should be made out to the Asimov Award. There is no limit to the number of submissions from each writer. Each submission must include the writer's name, address, phone number, and college or university on the cover sheet, but please do not put your name on the actual story.

Before entering the contest, please contact Rick Wilber for more information, rules, and manuscript guidelines. Rick can be reached care of:

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Next year's winner will be announced at the 2004 Conference on the Fantastic, in the pages of *Asimov's Science Fiction* magazine, and on our website. ❍

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OUR GÜNTHER LIKES TO DIG

Lee Allred

Lee Allred installs fiber optic networks for the Air Force. A previous Sidewise Award for Alternate History finalist, Mr. Allred tells us his stories "often combine history and the numinous." This is his first *Asimov's* publication.

Günther dug for the mud. He would dig you a ditch, a well, a cistern. It did not matter what you wanted dug. He would dig it as long as there was mud. If the ground you wanted dug was parched, if the dirt you wanted dug was dry, Günther would not dig. But if you added water, if you poured bucket after bucket until the dirt pooled and puddled, then Günther would dig for you.

And if you added filth in with it—if you slopped in the sun-soured whey the pigs had left in their troughs, if you stirred in greasy remains of butchered chickens, the buzzing fly-blown muck of stables, the urine from the porcelain under your bed, Günther would work twice as hard.

The empty grin that was his only expression would widen, and he would grunt and mutter his nonsense words as he smeared the filth across his chest and arms, inside his nose, his ears, his mouth. And he would dig.

Down would swing the pick. Down, down, down.

Up would come the shovelsful of dirt. Up. Up. Up.

From sunrise to sunset, without pause or stop, Günther would dig for you.

Konrad sat at a table outside the only store in the village. The green-striped canvas awning, torn and faded, slowly fluttered in the noonday breeze. Each flutter made a muffled *whump whump* above his head, like the beating downstroke of a soiled angel's wings. The lettering on the awning read "Mercancia." The sign above the door read "Schmidt."

The only signs of contact with the outside world were the canting electric poles parading up to the Mercancia and Konrad's dust-covered new '65 Chevy parked in front.

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He called to the owner and ordered another beer. The owner brought a bottle out, a different local brand from his first. The label was worn and faded. Konrad suspected that the storeowner brewed his own and poured it into the second-hand bottles. The beer here was much better than any other he'd had in Paraguay.

But that came as no surprise. One would expect good German beer in a village named Nueva Germania.

At first glance, Nueva Germania seemed no different from any other in the region. Save for the Mercancia, the village was nothing but narrow dirt streets and whitewashed adobe villages. Chickens darted in those streets. Pigs slowly contemplated the universe as their jaws moved side-to-side.

But Nueva Germania had one chief difference. Unlike the sienna-skinned mestizoes of the other villages, the ragged dirty villagers of Nueva Germania were blond and blue-eyed. Nietzsche's brother-in-law had founded an Aryan race colony here three generations ago.

And look at them now! No better than the stone-age mongrels surrounding them. This was the Fatherland's destiny now, too, now that the people had forsaken the Leader.

But Konrad and the others would save it from itself.

"Schmidt," he called. With the owner, at least, Konrad didn't need his halting Spanish. Schmidt and the other older villagers could still speak German. They hadn't degenerated that far yet.

The owner scuttled out to Konrad's table.

Konrad pointed at the huge pre-cast concrete cistern sitting in the middle of the main road through town. "Tell me, how are you going to get that in the hole?"

Schmidt's hands fluttered. "The hole, it was not finished when the truck from the factory arrived." His German had picked up the gurgling honey cadence of Spanish. "The drivers of the truck said it was our problem to move it, and they left. But we will think of something. Günther is almost done."

"Günther?"

Schmidt pointed to the dirty mud-splattered peasant shoveling dirt from a hole. The man's powerful arms threw shovelful after shovelful in an untiring rhythm, like some steel-muscled metronome.

"He likes to dig, that Günther."

Schmidt's smile faded when Konrad reopened his large brown envelope. "I want to show you this picture again," he said to Schmidt. "Perhaps you can remember something now."

In every village, there was always one who would talk to Konrad. Usually, they were the Schmidts of the village, the ones greedy and grasping enough to have lifted themselves from the drudgery of the field, letting their inferiors till and plow and bring their money to them as they sat under cool ceiling fans. Ones who knew who their friends were.

All it took was to finally convince the Schmidts of the world that Konrad was their friend, not one of those Jewish wolves, hunting in packs for the old men who'd escaped the phony courts of Nuremberg.

Konrad and the others sought the same men, too, but they sought to find them before the Jews did, to slip them back into Germany where

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they, the men who had seen and spoken and worked with the Leader every day, could inspire the German youth of today in Konrad's organization. They could save the Reich yet.

Konrad pulled out the small black-and-white photo again. The back of the photo was stamped "SS-Obersturmbannführer von Klimt" and bore the double-lightning sigil. The organization had intercepted a message meant for the Jews, rumors that the infamous commandant of Heynau camp had fled to Nueva Germania.

Schmidt squinted at the photo. He shook his head. "No, no. As I told you before, I have never seen this man."

"Have you ever heard of a man named von Klimt? Perhaps under a different name? Have any strangers moved here?"

"No, no." Again, Schmidt shook his head. "No strangers here. No one new has moved here, not for many, many years."

A chicken wandered near the hole across the street, and squawked as Günther threw a shovelful of dirt up on it.

Konrad flicked his gaze in the mud-covered man's direction. Von Klimt had been a rail-thin aristocrat, prissy to a fault. Once in the camp, one of the Jew apes had thrown a handful of mud at von Klimt and soiled von Klimt's lapel. He'd ordered the entire cellblock machine-gunned in retaliation. But first, he ordered the prisoners to dig the trench of their own mass grave. And that was but one of the stories. That was the kind of man the Reich needed again, the kind of man von Klimt was.

Konrad stared at the digging man, watched the slack-jawed brute stop his machine-like digging to bend down and scoop two splayed handfuls of mud and filth from the puddled hole and smear it over his chest and face, then shove the foul mass into his mouth. He started to grunt and croon in an imbecile's nonsense tongue as he picked up his shovel and began to dig again.

"Our Günther likes to dig," Schmidt said. "I think he will be done with that hole today."

Konrad was done here, too. He slid the photo back in the folder and stood up. The man he was searching for was somewhere else.

Let the Jews waste their time chasing rumors here.

The spinning tires of Konrad's car kicked a cloud of rocks and dirt into the half-dug pit where the digging man's churning shovel mixed it with the mud and threw it back into the road.

Schmidt was wrong. Günther would dig for you, but not because he liked to dig. He dug only for the mud.

He *must* dig for the mud.

The mud must be smeared across his chest, his face, his brow. The fouler the mud, the filthier the mud, the better. Fetid mud, foul tasting mud. He must smear it, smear the grit and grime and dirt, to cover the blood, to wash away the blood.

Günther must dig for the mud. The thin men, the gray-clothed men who swarmed constantly around him, the hollow-eyed men, told him to. ○

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THE EMPRESS OF MARS

Kage Baker

In addition to her forthcoming fantasy novel, The *Anvil of the World* (Tor Books, August 2003), Kage Baker's recent works include an entry in *The Thackery Lambshead Guide to Eccentric and Discredited Diseases* (Nightshade Books, 2004).

There were three Empresses of Mars.

The first one was a bar at the Settlement. The second was the lady who ran the bar; though her title was strictly informal, having been bestowed on her by the regular customers, and her domain extended no further than the pleasantly gloomy walls of the only place you could get beer on the Tharsis Bulge.

The third one was the Queen of England.

One: The Big Red Balloon

What were the British doing on Mars?

For one thing, they had no difficulty calculating with metric figures. For another, their space exploration effort had not been fueled primarily by a military industrial complex. This meant that it had never received infusions of taxpayers' money on the huge scale of certain other nations, but also meant that its continued existence had been unaffected by the inconvenient disappearance of enemies. Without the necessity of offworld missile bases, the major powers' interest in colonizing space had quite melted away. This left plenty of room for the private sector.

There was only one question, then: was there money on Mars?

There had definitely been money on Luna. The British Lunar Company had done quite well by its stockholders, with the proceeds from its mining and tourism divisions. Luna had been a great place to channel soci-

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etal malcontents as well, guaranteeing a work force of rugged individualists and others who couldn't fit in Down Home without medication.

But Luna was pretty thoroughly old news now and no longer anywhere near as profitable as it had been, thanks to the miners' strikes and the litigation with the Ephesian Church over the Diana of Luna incident. Nor was it romantic anymore: its sterile silver valleys were becoming domesticated, domed over with tract housing for all the clerks the BLC needed. Bureaucrats and missionaries had done for Luna as a frontier.

The psychiatric hospitals were filling up with unemployed rugged individualists again. Profit margins were down. The BLC turned its thoughtful eyes to Mars.

Harder to get to than Luna, but nominally easier to colonize. Bigger, but on the other hand no easy gravity well with which to ship ore down to Earth. This ruled out mining for export as a means of profit. And as for low-gravity experiments, they were cheaper and easier to do on Luna. What, really, had Mars to offer to the hopeful capitalist?

Only the prospect of terraforming. And terraforming would cost a lot of money and a lot of effort, with the *successful* result being a place slightly less hospitable than Outer Mongolia in the dead of winter.

But what are spin doctors for?

So the British Arean Company had been formed, with suitably orchestrated media fanfare. Historical clichés were dusted off and repackaged to look shiny-new. Games and films were produced to create a public appetite for adventure in rocky red landscapes. Clever advertising did its best to convince people they'd missed a golden opportunity by not buying lots on Luna when the land up there was dirt cheap, but intimated that they needn't kick themselves any longer: a second chance was coming for an even better deal!

And so forth and so on.

It all had the desired effect. A lot of people gave the British Arean Company a great deal of money in return for shares of stock that, technically speaking, weren't worth the pixels with which they were impressively depicted in old-engraving style. The big red balloon was launched. Missions to Mars were launched, a domed base was built, and actual scientists were sent out to the new colony along with the better-socially adapted inhabitants of two or three hospitals. So were the members of an incorporated clan, as a goodwill gesture in honor of the most recent treaty with the Celtic Federation. They brought certain institutions the BAC officially forbade, like polluting industries and beast slavery, but conceded were necessary to survival on a frontier.

So all began together the vast and difficult work of setting up the infrastructure for terraforming, preparing the way for wholesale human colonization.

Then there was a change of government, which coincided with the BAC discovering that the fusion generators they had shipped to Mars wouldn't work unless they were in a very strong electromagnetic field, and Mars, it seemed, didn't have much of one. This meant that powering life support alone would cost very much more than anyone had thought it would.

Not only that, the lowland canyons where principal settlement had

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been planned turned out to channel winds with devastating velocity. Only in the Tharsis highlands, where the air was thinner and colder, was it possible to erect a structure that wouldn't be scoured away by sandstorms within a week. The BAC discovered this after several extremely costly mistakes.

The balloon burst.

Not with a bang and shreds flying everywhere, exactly; more like a very fast leak, so it sort of dwindled down to an ignominious little lopsided thing without much air in it. Just like the dome of the Settlement Base.

So a lot of people were stuck up there without the money to come home, and they had to make the best of things. Under the circumstances, it seemed best to continue on with the job.

Mary Griffith woke alone that morning, though she did not always do so. She lay for a while in the dark, listening to the quiet, which was not the same thing as silence: low hum of the jenny and a few snores drifting from the other lofts tucked in under the curve of the dome like so many swallows' nests. No coughing. No quarreling. No fretful clunking to tell her that Three Tank needed its valves unblocked yet again.

Smiling to herself, she rolled out of her bedclothes and tossed the ladder over the side, so descending nimbly to meet the day. She was a compactly built and muscular little woman of a certain age. Her ancestors, most of them coal miners, had passed along with other hardy genetic characteristics a barrel chest, which gave her considerable bosom a certain massive foundation, and Martian gravity contributed in its own way to make Mother Griffith's Knockers famous throughout the Settlement.

Having sent the ladder back up on its reel and tied off the line neat as any sailor, she set the stove to heating and pumped a kettle of water. The water came up reluctantly, as it always did, rust-colored, strangling and spitting slush from the pipe, but it boiled clear; and as she sat and sipped her tea Mary watched the steam rise like a ghost in the dry cold air.

The visible phantom ascended and dissipated, reaching the lofts and sending its message to the other sleepers, who were pulled awake by its moistness as irresistibly as though it was the smell of eggs and bacon, were they back on Earth. Soon she heard them tossing in their blankets, heard a racking cough or a whispered exchange. She sighed, bidding goodbye to the last bit of early-morning calm. Another day begun.

She got up and rolled back the shade on the big window, and the sullen purple dawn flared in and lit her house.

"Oh, my, that's bright," said someone plaintively, high up in the shadows, and a moment later Mr. Morton came down on his line, in his long black thermals looking uncommonly like a hesitant spider.

"Good morning, Mr. Morton," said Mary, in English because his panCelt was still halting, and "Good morning, Ma'am," said he, and winced as his bare feet hit the cold sanded floor. Half-hopping he picked his way to the stove and poured his tea, inhaling the steam gratefully; brought it back to the long stone table and seated himself, wincing again as his knees knocked into the table supports. He stirred a good lump of butter into the tea and regarded Mary through the steam, looking anxious.

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"Er . . . what would you like me to do today?" he inquired.

Mary sighed and summoned patience.

He was nominally her employee, and had been so since that fateful afternoon when he, like so many others, had realized that his redundancy pay did not amount to half the fare back to Earth.

"Well, you didn't finish the scouring on Five Tank yesterday, did you?" she said.

"No," he agreed sadly.

"Then I think perhaps you had better do that, Mr. Morton."

"Okay," he said.

It was not his fault that he had to be told what to do. He had spent most of his adult life in hospital and a good bit of his childhood too, ever since (having at the age of ten been caught reading a story by Edgar Allan Poe) he had been diagnosed as Eccentric.

Mind you, it wasn't all jam and tea in hospital. Even the incurably twisted had to be of some use to society, and Mr. Morton had been brilliant at the chemistry, design, and fabrication of cast-stone structures for industrial use. That was why he had been recruited by the BAC, arriving on Mars with a single black duffel containing all he owned and a heart full of dreams of romantic adventure.

Having designed and fabricated all the structures the BAC needed, however, he had been summarily fired. He had gone wandering away through the Tubes and wound up at the Empress, his white thin face whiter still for shock, and sat at a dark table drinking batch for eight hours before Mary had asked him if he was ever going home, and then he had burst into tears.

So she had given him a job. Mary had been fired, herself. Not for redundancy, though, really; for being too Ethnic.

"Five Tank, yes, and in the afternoon we can brew another pale ale," she decided, "Or maybe a good oatmeal stout, what do you think?" and Mr. Morton brightened at that.

"Have we got any oats?" he inquired.

"If She provides them," Mary said, and he nodded sagely. Mr. Morton wasn't an Ephesian himself, but he was willing to concede that there was Somebody out there responsive to human prayer, and She certainly seemed to hear Mary's.

"Something will turn up," he said, and Mary nodded.

And when the day had well and truly begun—when the lodgers had all descended from their alcoves and gone trudging away down the Tubes to their varied employments, when Mary's daughters and their respective gentlemen callers had been roused and set smiling or sullen about the day's tasks, when the long stone counter had been polished to a dull shine and the heating unit under One Tank was filling the air with a grateful warmth, and Mary herself stood behind the bar drawing the first ale of the day, to be poured into the offering basin in the little shrine with its lumpy image of the Good Mother herself, dim-lit by her little flickering votive wire—even in that moment when the rich hoppy stuff hit the parched stone and foamed extravagantly, for CO_2 is never lacking on Mars—even just then the Lock doors swung open and in came the an-

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swer to prayer, being Padraig Moylan with a hundredweight sack of Clan Morrigan oats and two tubs of butter in trade.

Mr. Moylan was thanked with grace and sincerity, the clan's bar tab recalculated accordingly. Soon he was settled in a cozy alcove with a shot of red single malt and Mona, the best listener among Mary's children. Mary, having stashed the welcome barter in a locker, set about her slow eternal task of sweeping the red sand from her tables. She could hear Mr. Morton singing as he worked with his scouring pads, his dreamy lyric baritone echoing inside Five Tank, reverberating "Some Enchanted Evening."

Mary ticked him off her mental list of Things to be Seen To, and surveyed the rest of her house as she moved down the length of the table.

There was Alice, her firstborn, graceful as a swan and as irritable too, loading yesterday's beer mugs into the scouring unit. Rowan, brown and practical, was arranging today's mugs in neat ranks behind the bar. Worn by scouring, the mugs had a lovely silkiness on them now, shiny as pink marble, dwindling to a thinness and translucency that meant that soon they'd be too delicate for bar use and more would have to be cast. (Though when that happened, the old ones could be boxed up and sent out to the souvenir store in the landing port, to be sold as Finest Arean Porcelain to such guests as came to inspect the BAC public facilities.)

Over behind Four Tank, the shadows had retreated before a little minelamp, and by its light Chiring and Manco had a disassembled filtering unit spread out, cleaning away the gudge with careful paddles. The gudge too was a commodity, to be traded as fertilizer, which was a blessing because it accumulated with dreadful speed in the bottom of the fermentation tanks. It was a combination of blown sand, yeast slurry and the crawly stuff that grew on the ceiling, and it had a haunting and deathless smell, but mixed with manure and liberally spread over thin poor Martian soil, it defied superoxidants and made the barley grow.

And everyone agreed that getting the barley to grow was of vital importance.

So Chiring and Manco sang too, somewhat muffled behind recyclable cloth kerchiefs tied over their mouths and noses, joining the last bit of "Some Enchanted Evening" in their respective gruff bass and eerie tenor. A tiny handcam whirred away at them from its place on the table, adding footage to Chiring's ongoing documentary series for the Kathmandu *Post*. Mary nodded with satisfaction that all was well and glanced ceilingward at the last member of her household, who was only now rappelling down from the lowest of the lofts.

"Sorry," said the Heretic, ducking her head in awkward acknowledgment of tardiness and hurrying off to the kitchen, where she set about denting pans with more than usual effort to make up for being late. Mary followed after, for the Heretic was another problem case requiring patience.

The Heretic had been an Ephesian sister until she had had some kind of accident, about which few details were known, but which had left her blind in one eye and somehow gotten her excommunicated. She had been obliged to leave her convent under something of a cloud; and how she had wound up here on Mars was anybody's guess. She stammered, jittered,

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and dropped things, but she was at least not the proselytizing kind of heretic, keeping her blasphemous opinions to herself. She was also a passable cook, so Mary had agreed to take her on at the Empress.

"Are you all right?" asked Mary, peering into the darkness of the kitchen, where the Heretic seemed to be chopping freeze-dried soy protein at great speed.

"Yes."

"Don't you want the lights on? You'll cut off a finger," said Mary, turning the lights on, and the Heretic yelped and covered her good eye, swiveling the ocular replacement on Mary in a reproachful kind of way.

"Ow," she said.

"Are you hung over?"

"No," said the Heretic, cautiously uncovering her eye, and Mary saw that it was red as fire.

"Oh, dear. Did you have the dreams again?"

The Heretic stared through her for a moment before saying, in a strange and breathless voice, *"Out of the ground came scarlet flares, each one bursting, a heart's beacon, and He stood above the night and the red swirling cold sand and in His hand held up the Ace of Diamonds. It burned like the flares. He offered it forth, laughing and said: Can you dig it?"*

"Okay," said Mary, after a moment's silence.

"Sorry," said the Heretic, turning back to her cutting board.

"That's all right," said Mary. "Can you get luncheon on by eleven?"

"Yes."

"Oh, good," said Mary, and exited the kitchen.

Lady, grant me an ordinary day, she begged silently, for the last time the Heretic had said something bizarre like that, all manner of strange things had happened.

Yet the day rolled on in its accustomed groove as ordinary as you please. At noon, the luncheon crowd came in, the agricultural workers from the clan and contract laborers from the Settlement, who were either Sherpas like Chiring or Inkas like Manco; few English frequented the Empress of Mars, for all their Queen might smile from its sign.

After noon, when the laboring men and women went trooping back to their shifts through the brown whirling day, and the wind had reached its accustomed hissing howl, there was too much to do to worry. There were plates and bowls to be scoured, there was beer to brew, and there was the constant tinkering necessary to keep all the machines running, lest the window's forcefield fail against the eternal sandblast, among other things.

So Mary had forgotten all about any dire forebodings by the time the blessed afternoon interval of peace came round, and she retired to the best of her tables and put her feet up.

"Mum."

So much for peace. She opened one eye and looked at Rowan, who was standing there gesturing urgently at the communications console.

"Mr. Cochevelou sends his compliments, and would like to know if he might come up the Tube to talk about something," she said.

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"Hell," said Mary, leaping to her feet. It was not that she did not like Mr. Cochevelou, clan chieftain (indeed, he was more than a customer and patron); but she had a pretty good idea what it was he wanted to discuss.

"Tell him, 'of course,' and then go down and bring up a bottle of the Black Label," she said. She went to fetch a cushion for Mr. Cochevelou's favorite seat.

Cochevelou must have been waiting with his fist on the receiver, for it seemed no more than a minute later he came shouldering his way through the Tube, emerging from the airlock beard first, and behind him three of his household too, lifting their masks and blinking.

"Luck on this house," said Cochevelou hoarsely, shaking the sand from his suit, and his followers mumbled an echo, and Mary noted philosophically the dunelets piling up around their boots.

"Welcome to the Empress, Mr. Cochevelou. Your usual?"

"Bless you, Ma'am, yes," said Cochevelou, and she took his arm and led him away, jerking a thumb at Mona to indicate she should take a broom to the new sand. Mona sighed and obeyed without good grace, but her mother was far too busy trying to read Cochevelou's expression to notice.

Between the beard and the forge-soot, there wasn't much of Cochevelou's face to see; but his light eyes had a shifting look to them today, at once hopeful and uneasy. He watched Mary pour him a shot of Black Label, rubbing his thick fingers across the bridge of his nose and leaving pale streaks there.

"It's like this, Ma'am," he said abruptly. "We're sending Finn home."

"Oh," said Mary, filling another glass. "Congratulations, Mr. Finn."

"It's on account of I'm dying without the sea," said Finn, a smudgy creature in a suit that had been buckled tight and was still too big.

"And with the silicosis," added Cochevelou.

"That's beside the point," said Finn querulously. "I dream at night of the flat wet beach and the salt mist hanging low, and the white terns wheeling above the white wave. Picking dulse from the tidepools where the water lies clear as glass—"

There were involuntary groans from the others, and one of them booted Finn pretty hard in the ankle to make him stop.

"And, see, he goes on like that and drives the rest of us mad with his glass-clear water and all," said Cochevelou, raising his voice slightly as he lifted his cup and saluted Mary. "So what it comes down to is, we've finally saved enough to send one of us home and it's got to be him, you see? Your health, Ma'am."

He drank, and Mary drank, and when they had both drawn breath, she said:

"What's to happen to his Allotment?"

She had cut straight to the heart of the matter, and Cochevelou smiled in a grimacing kind of way.

Under the terms of the Mutual Use Treaty, which had been hammered out during that momentary thaw in relations between England and the Celtic Federation, every settler on Mars had received an Allotment of acreage for private terraforming. With the lease went the commitment to keep the land under cultivation, at the risk of its reverting to the BAC.

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The BAC, long since having repented its rash decision to invite so many undesirables to settle on Mars, had gotten into the habit of grabbing back land it did not feel was being sufficiently utilized.

"Well, that's the question," said Cochevelou. "It's twenty long acres of fine land, Ma'am."

"Five in sugar beets and fifteen in the best barley," said Finn.

"With the soundest roof ever built and its own well, and the sweetest irrigation pipes ever laid," said Cochevelou. "You wouldn't mind drinking out of them, I can tell you."

Mary became aware that dead silence had fallen in her house, that all her family were poised motionless with brooms or trays of castware to hear what would be said next. Barley was the life of the house. It was grown on cold and bitter Mars because it would grow anywhere, but it didn't grow well on the wretched bit of high-oxidant rock clay Mary had been allotted.

"What a pity if it was to revert to the BAC," she said noncommittally.

"We thought so, too," said Cochevelou, turning the cup in his fingers. "Because of course they'd plough that good stuff under and put it in soy, and wouldn't that be a shame? So of course we thought of offering it to you, first, Ma'am."

"How much?" said Mary at once.

"Four thousand punts Celtic," Cochevelou replied.

Mary narrowed her eyes. "How much of that would you take in trade?"

There was a slight pause.

"The BAC have offered us four grand in cash," said Cochevelou, in a somewhat apologetic tone. "You see. But we'd much rather have *you* as a neighbor, wouldn't we? So if there's any way you could possibly come up with the money. . . ."

"I haven't got it," said Mary bluntly, and she meant it too. Her small economy ran almost entirely on barter and goodwill.

"Aw, now, surely you're mistaken about that," said Cochevelou. "You could take up a collection, maybe. All the good workers love your place, and wouldn't they reach into their hearts and their pockets for a timely contribution? And some of your ex-BACs, haven't they got a little redundancy pay socked away in the bottom of the duffel? If you could even scrape together two-thirds for a down, we'd work out the most reasonable terms for you!"

Mary hesitated. She knew pretty well how much her people had, and it didn't amount to a thousand punts even if they presold their bodies to the xenoforensic studies lab. But the Lady might somehow provide, might She not?

"Perhaps I ought to view the property," she said.

"It would be our pleasure," said Cochevelou, grinning white in his sooty beard, and his people exchanged smiles, and Mary thought to herself: *Careful.*

But she rose and suited up, and fitted her mask on tight, and went for a stroll through the airlock with Cochevelou and his people.

The Settlement was quite a bit more now than the single modest dome

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that had sheltered the first colonists, though that still rose higher than any other structure, and it did have that lovely vizio top so its inhabitants could see the stars, and which gave it a rather Space-Age Moderne look. It wasted heat, though, and who the hell cared enough about two tiny spitspeck moons to venture out in the freezing night and peer upward at them?

The Tubes had a nice modern look too, where the English maintained them, with lots of transparencies that gave onto stunning views of the Red Planet.

To be strictly accurate, it was only a red planet in places. When Mary had come to live there, her first impression had been of an endless cinnamon-colored waste. Now she saw every color but blue, from primrose-curry-tomcat-ochre to flaming persimmon-vermilion through bloodred and so into ever more livery shades of garnet and rust. There were even greens, both the subdued yellowy olive khaki in the rock and the exuberant rich green of the covered acreage.

And Finn's twenty long acres were green indeed, rich as emerald with a barley crop that had not yet come into its silver beard. Mary clanked through the airlock after Cochevelou and stopped, staring.

"The Crystal Palace itself," said Finn proudly, with a wave of his hand.

She pulled off her mask and inhaled. The air stank, of course, from the methane; but it was rich and wet too, and with a certain sweetness. All down the long tunnel roofed with industrial-grade vizio, the barley grew tall, out to that distant point of shade change that must be sugar beet.

"Oh, my," she said, giddy already with the oxygen.

"You see?" said Cochevelou. "Worth every penny of the asking price."

"If I had it," she retorted, making an effort at shrewdness. It was a beautiful holding, one that would give her all the malted barley she could use and plenty to trade on the side or even to sell. . . .

"No wonder the English want this," she said, and her own words echoed in her ears as she regarded the landscape beyond the vizio, the low-domed methane hell of the clan's cattle pens, the towering pipe-maze of Cochevelou's ironworks.

"No wonder the English want this," she repeated, turning to look Cochevelou in the eye. "If they own this land, it divides Clan Morrigan's holdings smack in two, doesn't it?"

"Too right," agreed Finn. "And then they'll file actions to have the cowshed and the ironworks moved as nuisances, see and—ow," he concluded, as he was kicked again.

"And it's all a part of their secret plot to drive us out," said Cochevelou rather hastily. "You see? They've gone and made us an offer we can't refuse. Now we've broke the ground and manured it for them, they've been just waiting and waiting for us to give up and go home, so they can grab it all. The day after we filed the papers to send Finn back, bastardly Inspector Baldwin shows up on our property."

"Didn't his face fall when he saw what a nice healthy crop we had growing here!" said Finn, rubbing his ankle.

"So he couldn't condemn it and get the lease revoked, you see?" Cochevelou continued, giving Finn a black look. "Because obviously it

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ain't abandoned, it's gone into our collective's common ownership. But it wasn't eight hours later he came around with that offer of four thousand for the land. And if we take it, yes, it's a safe bet they'll start bitching and moaning about our cattle and all."

"Don't sell," said Mary. "Or sell to one of your own."

"Sweetheart, you know we've always thought of you as one of our own," said Cochevelou soupily. "Haven't we? But who in our poor clan would ever be able to come up with that kind of money? And as for not selling, why, you and I can see that having the BAC in here would be doom and destruction and (which is worse) lawsuits inevitable somewhere down the road. But it isn't up to me. Most of our folk will only be able to see that big heap of shining BAC brass they're being offered. And they'll vote to take it, see?"

"We could do a lot with that kind of money," sighed Matelot, he who had been most active kicking Finn. "Buy new generators, which we sorely need. More vizio, which as you know is worth its weight in transparent gold. Much as we'd hate to sell to strangers . . ."

"But if you were to buy the land, we'd have our cake and be able to eat it too, you see?" Cochevelou explained.

Mary eyed him resentfully. She saw, well enough: whichever way the dice fell, she was going to lose. If the Clan Morrigan acreage shrank, her little economy would go out of balance. No barley, no beer.

"You've got me in a cleft stick, Cochevelou," she told him, and he looked sad.

"Aren't we both in a cleft stick, and you're just in the tightest part?" he replied. "But all you have to do is come up with the money, and we're both riding in high cotton, and the BAC can go off and fume. Come on now, darling, you don't have to make up your mind right away! We've got thirty days. Go on home and talk it over with your people, why don't you?"

She clapped her mask on and stamped out through the airlock, muttering.

Mary had been accustomed, all her life, to dealing with emergencies. When her father had announced that he was leaving and she'd have to come home from University to take care of her mother, she had coped. She'd found a job, and a smaller apartment, where she and her mother had lived in an uneasy state of truce until her mother had taken all those sleeping pills. Mary had coped again: buried her mother, found a still smaller apartment, and taken night University courses until she'd got her doctorate in xenobotany.

When Alice's father had died, Mary had coped. She'd summoned all her confidence, and found a prestigious research and development job that paid well enough to keep Alice out of the Federation orphanage.

When Rowan's father had deserted, she'd still coped, though he'd waltzed with most of her money; two years' hard work taking extra projects had gotten her on her feet again.

When Mona's father had decided he preferred boys, she had coped without a moment's trouble to her purse if not her heart, secure in her own finances now with lessons hard-learned. And when the BAC head-

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hunters had approached her with a job offer, it had seemed as though it was the Lady's reward for all her years of coping.

A glorious adventure on another world! The chance to explore, to classify, and to enshrine her name forever in the nomenclature of Martian algae! The little girls had listened with round eyes, and only Alice had sulked and wept about leaving her friends, and only for a little while. So they'd all set off together bravely and become Martians, and the girls had adapted in no time, spoiled rotten as the only children on Mars.

And Mary had five years of happiness as a valued member of a scientific team, respected for her expertise, finding more industrial applications for *Cryptogametes gryffyuddi* than George Washington Carver had found for the peanut.

But when she had discovered all there was to discover about useful lichens on Mars (and in five years she had pretty much exhausted the subject), the BAC had no more use for her.

The nasty interview with General Director Rotherhithe had been both unexpected and brief. Her morals were in question, it had seemed. She had all those resource-consuming children, and while that sort of thing might be acceptable in a Celtic Federation country, Mars belonged to England. She was known to indulge in controlled substances, also no crime in the Federation, but certainly morally wrong. And the BAC had been prepared to tolerate her, ah, *religion* in the hopes that it would keep her from perpetuating certain other kinds of immorality, which had unfortunately not been the case—

"What, because I have men to my bed?" Mary had demanded, unfortunately not losing her grasp of English. "You dried-up dirty-minded old stick, I'll bet you'd wink at it if I had other women, wouldn't you? Bloody hypocrite! I've heard you keep a Lesbian Holopeep in your office cabinet—"

Academic communities are small and full of gossip, and even smaller and more full of gossip under a biodome, and secrets cannot be kept at all. So *Julie and Sylvia Take Deportment Lessons From Ms. Lash* had been giggled at, but never mentioned out loud. Until now.

General Director Rotherhithe had had a choking fit and gone a nice shade of lilac, and Sub-Director Thorpe had taken over to say that It was therefore with infinite regret, et cetera. . . .

And Mary had had to cope again.

She hadn't cared that she couldn't afford the fare home; she loved Mars. She had decided she was damned if she was going to be thrown off. So, with her final paycheck, she'd gone into business for herself.

She'd purchased a dome from the Federation colonists, a surplus shelter originally used for livestock; and though the smell took some weeks to go away even in the dry thin air, the walls were sound and warm, and easily remodeled with berths for lodgers.

Chiring, who had had his contract canceled with the BAC for writing highly critical articles about them and sending the columns home to the Kathmandu *Post*, came to her because he too had nowhere else to go. He was a decent mechanic, and helped her repair the broken well pump and set up the generators.

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Manco Inka, who had been asked to leave the BAC community because he was discovered to be a (sort of) practicing Christian, brought her a stone-casting unit in exchange for rent, and soon she'd been able to cast her five fine brewing tanks and ever so many cups, bowls, and dishes. Cochevelou himself had stood her the first load of barley for malting.

And once it was known that she had both beer and pretty daughters, the Empress of Mars was in business.

For five years now, it had stood defiantly on its rocky bit of upland slope, the very picture of what a cozy country tavern on Mars ought to be: squat low dome grown all over with lichen patches most picturesque, except on the weather-wall where the prevailing winds blasted it bald with an unceasing torrent of sand, so it had to be puttied constantly with red stonecast leavings to keep it whole there. Mary swapped resources with the clan, with the laborers, with even a few stealthy BAC personnel for fuel and food, and an economy had been born.

And now it was threatened, and she was going to have to cope again.

"Holy Mother, why is it always *something?*" she growled into her mask, kicking through drifts as she stormed back along the Tube. "Could I count on You for even one year where nothing went wrong for once? I could not, indeed.

"And now I'm expected to pull Cochevelou's smoky black chestnuts out of the fire for him, the brute, and where am I to come up with the money? Could You even grant me one little miracle? Oh, no, I'm strong enough to cope on my own, aren't I? I'll solve everyone's problems so they needn't develop the spine to do it themselves, won't I? Bloody hell!"

She came to a transparency and glared out.

Before her was Dead Snake Field, a stretch of rock distinguished by a cairn marking the last resting place of Cochevelou's pet ball python, which had survived the trip to Mars only to escape from its terrarium and freeze to death Outside. Initial hopes that it might be thawed and revived had been dashed when Finn, in an attempt at wit, had set the coiled icicle on his head like a hat and it had slipped off and fallen to the floor, shattering.

There in the pink distance, just under the melted slope of Mons Olympus, was the sad-looking semicollapsed vizio wall of Mary's own few long acres, the nasty little Allotment she'd been granted almost as a nose-thumbing with her redundancy pay. Its spidery old Aeromotors gave it a deceptively rural look. With all the abundant freaky Martian geology to choose from, the BAC had managed to find her a strip of the most sterile clay imaginable; and though she was unable to farm it very effectively, they had never shown any inclination to snatch it back.

"There's another joke," she snarled. "Fine fertile fields, is it? Oh, damn the old purse-mouth pervert!"

She stalked on and shortly came to the Tube branch leading to her allotment, and went down to see how her own crops were doing.

Plumes of mist were leaking from the airlock seal; now that needed replacing too, something *else* broken she couldn't afford to fix. There were tears in her eyes as she stepped through and lowered her mask, to survey that low yellow wretched barley, fluttering feebly in the oxygen waves.

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The contrast with Finn's lush fields was too much. She sat down on an overturned bucket and wept, and her tears amounted to one scant drop of water spattering on the sere red clay, fizzing like peroxide.

When her anger and despair were wept out, she remained staring numbly at the fast-drying spot. The clay was the exact color of terracotta.

"I wonder," she said, "whether we could make pots out of the damned stuff."

She didn't need pots, of course; she could stonecast all the household vessels she needed out of Martian dust. What else was clay good for?

Sculpting things, she thought to herself. Works of art? Useful bric-a-brac? Little tiles with SOUVENIR OF MARS stamped into them? Though she had no artistic talent herself, maybe one of her people had, and then what if they could get the Export Bazaar to take pieces on consignment? The Arean Porcelain sold pretty well.

"What the hell," she said, wiping her eyes, and standing up she righted the bucket and fetched a spade from the tool rack. She dug down a meter or so through the hardpan, gasping with effort even in the (comparatively) rich air, and filled the bucket with stiff chunks of clay. Then she put on her mask again and trudged home, lugging the latest hope for a few punts.

In her house, her family might have been frozen in their places from the moment she'd left. On her entry they came to shamefaced hurried life again, resuming their various household chores as though they'd been hard at work ever since she'd left and not standing around discussing the clan's offer.

Mr. Morton came stalking up to her, knotting his fingers together.

"Er—Ma'am, we've been talking, and—"

"Here, Mama, that's too heavy for you," said Manco, scuttling close and relieving her of the bucket. "You sit down, huh?"

"Very kind, I'm sure," Mary said sourly, looking around. "I'll bet not one of you started the oatmeal stout brewing like I asked, have you? Take that out to the ball mill," she added to Manco, pointing at the bucket. "As long as we've got all this damned clay, let's put it to good use and make something out of it."

"Yes, Mama."

"Here, you sit down—" Mr. Morton gestured her toward a chair with flapping motions of his long arms.

"I can't sit down! I have too much to do. Holy Mother, Alice, that heating unit should have been turned on an hour ago! Do I have to see to everything around here?"

"Water's heating now, Mum," Alice cried, running back from Tank Three.

"Well, but I wanted to tell you about our ideas—if it would be all right—" said Mr. Morton.

"I'm sure it will be when I'm not so busy, Mr. Morton," said Mary, grabbing a push broom and going after the sand again. "Rowan, did you and Chiring reinstall the filter the new way we discussed?"

"Yes, Mum, and—"

"See, I thought we might raise four thousand pounds easily if we put on

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a sort of cabaret in here," Mr. Morton continued earnestly. "Like a dinner show? I could sing and do dramatic recitals, and—"

"What a very nice idea, Mr. Morton, and I'm sure I'll think about it, but in the meanwhile I need you to get that sack of oats out of the storage locker."

"And I thought I could do a striptease," said Mona.

Three broom-pushes before the meaning sank in, and then:

"Striptease?" Mary shouted. "Are you mad? When the BAC already sees us as a cesspit of immorality and substance abuse? That'd really frost the cake!"

Mona pouted. "But you said when you were at University—"

"That was a long time ago and I needed the money, and—"

"And we need the money now! We *never* have any money!"

"Ladies, please—" said poor Mr. Morton, his face pink for once.

"The oats, Mr. Morton. Mona, you will keep your clothes on until you come of age and that's all that will be said on the subject, do you understand?"

"What's this?" said Manco, emerging from the utility area and holding out something in his hand. He had an odd look on his face. "This was in the bottom of the bucket. The clay cracked apart and—"

"It's a rock," said Mary, glancing at it. "Pitch it out."

"I don't think it's a rock, Mama."

"He's right," said Chiring, squinting at it. "It looks more like a crystal."

"Then put it on the back bar with the fossils and we'll ask one of the geologists about it. What was that?" Mary looked up suspiciously. "Who's that? Who just threw up?"

"It was me," said Alice miserably, emerging from behind the bar, and Rowan ran to her with a bar towel.

Mary ground her teeth. "Food poisoning. Just what we all needed. That devil-worshipping looney—" She started for the kitchen with blood in her eye, but was stopped in her tracks as Rowan said quietly:

"It's not food poisoning, Mum."

Mary did an about-face, staring at her daughters. There was a profound moment of silence in which she continued staring, and the three men present wondered what was going on, until Alice wailed:

"Well, I didn't think you could *get* pregnant on Mars!"

So in all the excitement, the crystal was stuck on the back bar and forgotten until that evening, when the Brick came in from his polar run.

The Brick was so named because he resembled one. Not only was he vast and tall and wide in his quilted Hauler's jumpsuit, he was the color of a brick as well, though what shade he might be under years of high-impact red dust was anybody's guess.

There was red grit between his teeth when he grinned, as he did now on emerging from the airlock, and his bloodshot red eyes widened in the pleasant evening darkness of the Empress. He lifted his head and sucked in air through a nose flattened as a gorilla's from years of collisions with fists, boots, steering wheels, and (it was rumored) hospital orderlies' foreheads. He had been on Mars a long, long time.

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"Damn, I love that smell," he howled in English, striding to the bar and slapping down his gauntlets. "Beer, onions, and soygold nuggets frying, eh? Give me a Party Platter with Bisto and a pitcher of Foster's."

"I'm afraid we don't have Foster's, sir," dithered Mr. Morton. Mary elbowed him.

"It's what we call the Ares Lager when he's in here," she murmured, and Mr. Morton ran off at once to fill a pitcher.

"How's it going, Beautiful?"

"Tolerably, Mr. Brick," said Mary, sighing.

He looked at her keenly and his voice dropped a couple of decibels when he said, "Trouble over something? Did the BAC finally get that warrant?"

"What warrant?"

"Oh, nothing you need to know about right now," he said casually, accepting his pitcher of beer and drinking from it. "Not to worry, doll. Uncle Brick hears rumors all the time, and half of 'em never pan out. As long as the Ice Haulers want you here, you'll stay here."

"I suppose they're trying to get me closed down again," said Mary. "Bad cess to them, and what else is new? But I have other problems today."

She told him about the day's occurrences and he listened, sipping and nodding meanwhile, grunting occasionally in agreement or surprise.

"Congratulations, m'dear," he said. "This'll be the first human child born on Mars, you know that? Any idea who the father is?"

"She knows who she *hasn't* been with, at least," said Mary. "And there'll be tests, so it's not as though we'll be in suspense for long. It's only a baby, after all. But where am I going to get four thousand punts, I'd like to know?"

Brick rumbled meditatively, shaking his head.

"'Only a baby', she says. You know they're not having 'em Down Home any more, don't you?"

"Oh, that's certainly not true. I had three myself," said Mary indignantly.

"The birth rate's dropping, all the same," said the Brick, having another sip of his beer. "That's what I hear. Funny thing for a species to do when it's colonizing other planets, isn't it?"

Mary shrugged. "I'm sure it isn't as bad as all that," she said. "Life will go on somehow. It always does. The Goddess provides."

"I guess so," agreed Brick, and his voice rose to a genial roar as he hailed the Heretic, shuffling out from the kitchen with his Party Platter. "Hey, sweetheart! You're looking gorgeous this evening."

The Heretic blinked at him and shuffled closer. "Hi," she said, offering him the food. He took it in one hand and swept her close for a kiss on the forehead.

"How've you been?"

"I saw the living glory burning. A bright tower in the icy waste," she said.

"That's nice. Can I get just a little more Bisto on these fries?"

"Okay."

The Heretic went back to the kitchen and fetched out a little saucepan of gravy-like substance, and as she larded Brick's dinner, Mary went on:

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"If you could see that twenty acres! It was as rich as pudding, probably from our very own sewage we sold them, and green as anything on Earth. Where I'm going to get the cash for it I simply do not know. Chiring makes forty punts a week from his column in the Kathmandu *Post*, of which he has kindly offered me ten per week toward the land, but I've only got a month. If one of my people was a brilliant artist we might sell some folk art out of clay, but all of them protested they're quite talentless, so bang goes another good idea, and I'm running out of good ideas. Just when I thought everything had settled down to some kind of equilibrium—"

"What's that new thing on the back bar?" inquired Brick, slightly muffled because his mouth was full.

"Oh. That? Wait, you were a mineralogist, weren't you?" Mary paused, looking over her shoulder at him as she fetched the crystal down.

"I have been many things, m'dear," he informed her, washing down his mouthful with more beer. "And I did take a degree in Mineralogy at the University of Queensland once."

"Then you have a look at it. It was in some clay I dug up this afternoon. Maybe quartz with some cinnabar stain? Or more of the ever-present rust? It's a funny old thing." She tossed it over and he caught it in his massive hand, peered at it for a long moment.

Then he unflapped his transport suit, reached into the breast and brought out a tiny spectrometer mounted in a headset. He slipped it on with one hand, holding the crystal out to the light with the other. He stared through the eyepiece for a long moment.

"Or do you think it's some kind of agate?" said Mary.

"No," Brick replied, turning and turning the crystal in his hand. "Unless this gizmo is mistaken, sweetheart, you've got yourself a diamond here."

Nobody believed it. How could something that looked like a lump of frozen tomato juice be worth anything? *A diamond?*

Whatever it turned out to be, however, everyone agreed that the BAC must not be told.

Cochevelou offered to trade the glorious twenty acres for the rock outright, and in fact proposed to Mary. Smiling, she declined. But terms of sale for the land were worked out and a deposit of ten punts was accepted, and the transfer of title was registered with the BAC by Mr. Morton, who as a Briton seemed less likely to annoy the authorities.

And on the appointed day, the rock was sewn into the lining of Finn's thermal suit, and he was seen off to the spaceport with much cheer, after promising faithfully to take the diamond straight to the best dealers in Amsterdam immediately on arriving Down Home.

The next they heard of him, however, was that he was found drowned and smiling on the rocks at Antrim not three weeks after his homecoming, a bottle still clutched in his hand.

Mary shrugged. She had title to the land, and Cochevelou had ten punts a week from her. For once, she thought to herself, she had broken even.

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Two: The Richest Woman on Mars

It was the Queen's Birthday, and Mary was hosting the Cement Kayak Regatta.

Outdoor sports were possible on Mars. Just.

Not to the extent that the famous original advertising holo implied (grinning man in shirtsleeves with football and micromask, standing just outside an airlock door, captioned: "This man is actually STANDING on the SURFACE of MARS!" though without any mention of the fact that the holo had been taken at noon on the hottest day in summer at the equator and that the man remained outside for exactly five seconds before the shot was taken, after which he leaped back inside and begged for a bottle of Visine), but possible nonetheless, especially if you were inventive.

The cement kayaks had been cast of the ever-present and abundant Martian grit, and fitted at one end with tiny antigravity units. These, like so many other things on Mars, did not work especially well, but enabled the kayaks to float about two feet above the ground. Indoors, they bobbed aimlessly in place, having no motive power; once pushed out an airlock, they were at the mercy of the driving winds.

But it was possible to deflect or direct the wind with big double-bladed paddles made of scrap pipe and sheet metal, salvaged from the BAC's refuse tip. It was then possible to sail along through the air, if you wore full Outside kit, and actually sort of steer.

So Cement Kayaking had become a favorite sport on Mars, indeed the only outdoor sport. An obstacle course had been set up in Dead Snake Field, and four kayaks lurched about in it now, fighting the wind and each other.

"Competitive sport and the pioneer spirit," Chiring was announcing into his handcam, a solemn talking head against a background of improbable action. "Anachronisms on Earth, do they fulfill a vital function here on the final frontier? Have these colonists fallen back on degrading social violence, or is cultural evolution an ongoing process on Mars?" Nobody answered him.

The Tube was blocked with spectators, crowding around the transparencies to watch. They were also shouting, which dried their throats nicely, so the beer was selling well.

"LEFT, RAMSAY!" howled Cochevelou, pointing vainly at the hololoop of Queen Anne waving that served as the mid-point marker. "Oh, you stupid little git, LEFT!"

"A Phobos Porter for you, Cochevelou?" Mary inquired cheerily. "On the house?"

"Yes, please," he growled. Mary beckoned and the Heretic trudged back along the line. She turned to display the castware tank she bore in its harness on her back, and Mary selected a mug from the dangling assortment and drew a pint with practiced ease.Cochevelou took it, lifted his mask and gulped it down, wiping the foam from his moustache with the back of his hand.

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"Very kind of you, I'm sure," he said bitterly. "Given the amount I'm losing today. YOU'RE A DISGRACE TO FLUFFY'S MEMORY!" he bellowed at Ramsay. Fluffy had been the python's name.

"*We buried evil on Mars*," said the Heretic in a dreamy little voice, and nobody paid any attention to her.

"It's not really his fault," said Mary. "How can the poor man hope to compete with our Manco? It's all those extra blood vessels in his fingertips, you know, from being born in the Andes. Gives him better control of the paddles. Selected by Nature, as it were."

"You must have bet a packet on him," said Cochevelou, staring as Manco swung round Fluffy's Cairn and sent Ramsay spinning off to the boundary with an expert paddle-check.

"Bet? Now, dear Mr. Cochevelou, where would I get the money to do that?" said Mary, smiling wide behind her mask. "You're getting every penny I earn for Finn's Field, so you are."

Cochevelou grimaced.

"Speak no ill of the dead and all, but if I could ever get my hands on that little bastard's neck—" he said.

"Beer please," said one of the BAC engineers, shouldering through the crowd.

"A pint for the English!" Mary announced, and he looked around guiltily and pulled up the hood of his suit. "How nice of you to come down here to our primitive little fete. Perhaps later we can do some colorful folk dancing for your amusement." She handed him a mug. "That'll be one punt Celtic."

"I heard you'll take air filters," said the engineer in an undertone.

"What size, dear?"

"BX3s," replied the engineer, drawing one from the breast of his suit and displaying it. Mary inspected it critically and took it from him.

"Your gracious patronage is always appreciated," she said, and handed it to the Heretic, who tucked it out of sight. "Enjoy your beer. You see, Cochevelou? No money in my hands at all. What's a poor little widow to do?"

But Cochevelou missed the sarcasm, staring over her head down the tunnel.

"Who's this coming?" he said. "Did they bring a passenger on the last transport up?"

Mary turned and saw the newcomer, treading gingerly along in the catstep people walked with before they became accustomed to Martian gravity. He was tall, and wore a shiny new thermal suit, and he carried a bukecase. He was peering uncertainly through his goggles at the crowd around the transparencies.

"That's a damned solicitor, that's what that is," said Cochevelou, scowling blackly. "Five'll get you ten he's come to see you or me."

Mary's lip curled. She watched as the newcomer studied the crowd. He swung his mask in her direction at last, and stared; then walked toward her decisively.

"It's you, eh?" said Cochevelou, trying not to sound too relieved as he sidled away. "My sympathies, Mary darling."

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"MS. GRIFFITH?" inquired the stranger. Mary folded her arms.

"I am," she replied.

"ELIPHAL DE WIT," he said. "I'VE HAD QUITE A TIME FINDING YOU!"

"TURN YOUR SPEAKER DOWN! I'M NOT DEAF!"

"OH! I'M sorry," said Mr. De Wit, hurriedly twiddling the knob. "Is that better? They didn't seem to know who you were at the port office, and then they admitted you were still resident but unemployed, but they wouldn't tell me where you lived. Very confusing."

"You're not from the BAC, then?" Mary looked him up and down.

"What?" Mr. De Wit started involuntarily at the crowd's roar of excitement. The English kayaker had just swung past the midway marker. "No. Didn't you get my communication? I'm from Polieos of Amsterdam."

"WHAT?" said Mary, without benefit of volume knob.

"I'm here about your diamond," Mr. De Wit explained.

"And to think of all the dreadful things I said about poor dear Finn, when I thought he'd failed in his sacred trust! And I thought you were a solicitor at first!" Mary babbled, setting down a pitcher of batch and two mugs.

"Actually, Ms. Griffith, I am one," said Mr. De Wit, gazing around at the inside of the Empress. "On permanent retainer for Polieos, to deal with special circumstances."

"Really?" Mary halted in the act of reaching to fill his mug.

"And I'm here as your counsel," he explained carefully. "There has really been no precedent for this situation. Polieos feels it would be best to proceed with a certain amount of caution at first."

"Don't they want to buy my diamond, then?" Mary demanded.

"Absolutely, yes, Ms. Griffith," Mr. De Wit assured her. "And we would prefer to buy it from you. I'm here to determine whether or not we can legally do that."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well—" Mr. De Wit lifted his mug and paused, staring down at the brown foam brimming. "Er—what are we drinking?"

"It's water we've put things in, because you wouldn't want to drink Mars water plain," said Mary impatiently. "No alcohol in it, dear, so it won't hurt you if you're not a drinking man. Cut to the chase, please."

Mr. De Wit set his mug aside, folded his hands and said:

"In a minute, I'm going to ask you how you got the diamond, but I'm going to tell you a few things first, and it's important that you listen closely.

"What you sent us is a red diamond, a true red, which is very rare. The color doesn't come from impurities, but from the arrangement of the crystal lattice within the stone itself. It weighs 306 carats at the present time, uncut, and preliminary analysis indicates it has remarkable potential for a modified trillion cut. It would be a unique gem even if it hadn't come from Mars. The fact that it did makes its potential value quite a bit greater."

He took the buke from its case and connected the projector arm and dish. Mary watched with suspicion as he completed setup and switched it on. After a couple of commands, a holo-image shot forth, hanging in the

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dark air between them, and Mary recognized the lump she'd entrusted to Finn.

"That's my diamond!"

"As it is now," said Mr. De Wit. "Here's what we propose to do with it." He gave another command and the sullen rock vanished. In its place was an artist's conception of a three-cornered stone the color of an Earth sunset. Mary caught her breath.

"Possibly 280 carats," said Mr. De Wit.

"What's it worth?"

"That all depends," Mr. De Wit replied. "A diamond is only worth the highest price you can get for it. The trick is to make it *desirable*. It's red, it's from Mars—those are big selling points. We'll need to give it a fancy name. At present," and he coughed apologetically, "it's being called the Big Mitsubishi, but the marketing department will probably go with either the War-God's Eye or the Heart of Mars."

"Yes, yes, whatever," said Mary.

"Very well. And Polieos is prepared to cut, polish, and market the diamond. We can do this as your agents, in which case our fee will be deducted from the sale price, or we can buy it from you outright. *Assuming*," and Mr. De Wit held up a long forefinger warningly, "that we can establish that you are, in fact, the owner."

"Hm." Mary frowned at the tabletop. She had a pretty good idea of what was coming next.

"You see, Ms. Griffith, under the terms of your Allotment lease with the BAC, you are entitled to any produce grown on the land. The terms of your lease do not include mineral rights to the aforesaid land. Therefore—"

"If I dug it up on my Allotment, it belongs to the BAC," said Mary.

"Exactly. If, however, someone sold you the diamond," and Mr. De Wit looked around at the Empress again, his gaze dwelling on the more-than-rustic details, "say perhaps some colorful local character who found it somewhere else and traded it to you for a drink—well, then, not only is it your diamond, but we have a very nice story for the marketing department at Polieos."

"I see," said Mary.

"Good. And now, Ms. Griffith, if you please: how did you come into possession of the diamond?" Mr. De Wit sat back and folded his hands.

Mary spoke without pause. "Why, sir, one of our regulars brought it in! An Ice Hauler, as it happens, and he found it somewhere on his travels between poles. Traded it to me for two pints of my best Ares Lager."

"Excellent." Smiling, Mr. Dr. Wit shut off the buke and stood. "And now, Ms. Griffith, may I see the Allotment where you didn't find the diamond?"

As they were walking back from the field, and Mr. De Wit was wiping the clay from his hands, he said quietly:

"It's just as well the land isn't producing anything much. When the diamond becomes public knowledge, you can expect the BAC to make you an offer for the Allotment."

"Even though I didn't find the diamond there?" said Mary warily.

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"Yes. And I would take whatever they offer, Ms. Griffith, and I would buy passage back to Earth."

"I'll take what they offer, but I'm not leaving Mars," said Mary. "I've hung on through bad luck and I'm damned if good luck will pry me out. This is my home!"

Mr. De Wit tugged at his beard, unhappy about something.

"You'll have more than enough money to live in comfort on Earth," he said. "And things are about to change up here, you know. As soon as anyone suspects there's real money to be made on Mars, you won't know the place."

"I think I'll do smashing, whatever happens," said Mary. "Miners drink, don't they? Anywhere people go to get rich, they need places to spend their money."

"That's true," said Mr. De Wit, sighing.

"And just think what I can do with all that money!" Mary crowed. "No more making do with the BAC's leftovers!" She paused by a transparency and pointed out at the red desolation. "See that? It's nobody's land. I could have laid claim to it any time this five years, but what would I have done with it? It's the bloody BAC has the water and the lights and the heating and the vizio I'd need!"

"But with *money*. . . ."

By the time they got back to the Empress, she was barreling along in her enthusiasm with such speed that Mr. De Wit was panting as he tried to keep up. She jumped in through the airlock, faced her household (just in from the field of glorious combat and settling down to a celebratory libation) flung off her mask, and cried: "Congratulate me, you lot! I'm the richest woman on Mars!"

"You did bet on the match," said Rowan reproachfully.

"I did not," said Mary, thrusting a hand at Mr. De Wit. "You know who this kind gentleman is? This is my extremely good friend from Amsterdam." She winked hugely. "He's a *gem* of a man. A genuine *diamond* in the rough. And he's brought your mother very good news, my dears."

Stunned silence while everyone took that in, and then Mona leaped up screaming.

"*Thediamondthediamondthediamond!* Omigoddess!"

"How much are we getting for it?" asked Rowan at once.

"Well—" Mary looked at Mr. De Wit. "There's papers and things to sign, first, and we have to find a buyer. But there'll be more than enough to fix us all up nicely, I'm sure."

"Very probably," Mr. De Wit agreed.

"We finally won't be POOR anymore!" caroled Mona, bounding up and down.

"Congratulations, Mama!" said Manco.

"Congratulations, Mother," said Chiring.

Mr. Morton giggled uneasily.

"So . . . this means you're leaving Mars?" he said. "What will the rest of us do?"

"I'm not about to leave," Mary assured him. His face lit up.

"Oh, that's wonderful! Because I've got nothing to go back to, down there, you know, and Mars has been the first place I ever really—"

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"What do you MEAN we're not leaving?" said Alice in a strangled kind of voice. "You're ruining my life *again*, aren't you?"

She turned and fled. Her bedchamber being as it was in a loft accessible only by rope ladder, Alice was unable to leap in and fling herself on her bed, there to sob furiously; so she resorted to running away to the darkness behind the brew tanks and sobbing there.

"... felt as though I belonged in a family," Mr. Morton continued.

Alice might weep, but she was outvoted.

Rowan opted to stay on Mars. Mona waffled on the question until the boy-to-girl ratio on Earth was explained to her, after which she firmly cast her lot with the Red Planet. Chiring had no intention of leaving; his *Dispatches from Mars* had doubled the number of subscribers to the Kathmandu *Post*, which was run by his sister's husband, and as a result of the Mars exposés he looked fair to win Nepal's highest journalism award.

Manco had no intention of leaving either, since it would be difficult to transport his life's work. This was a shrine in a grotto three kilometers from the Empress, containing a cast-stone life-sized statue of the Virgen de Guadalupe surrounded by roses sculpted from a mixture of pink Martian dust and Manco's own blood. It was an ongoing work of art, and an awesome and terrible thing.

The Heretic, when asked if she would like to return to Earth, became so distraught that her ocular implant telescoped and retracted uncontrollably for five minutes before she was able to stammer out a refusal. She would not elaborate. Later she drank half a bottle of Black Label and was found unconscious behind the malt locker.

"So, you see? We're staying," said Mary to the Brick, in grim triumph.

"Way to go, Beautiful," said the Brick, raising his breakfast pint of Ares Lager. "I just hope you're ready to deal with the BAC, because this'll *really* get up their noses. And I hope you can trust this Dutchman."

"Here he is now," said Chiring *sotto voce*, looking up from the taphead he was in the act of changing. They raised their heads to watch Mr. De Wit's progress down from the ceiling on his line. He made it to the floor easily and tied off his line like a native, without one wasted gesture; but as he turned to them again, he seemed to draw the character of Hesitant Tourist about him like a cloak, stooping slightly as he peered through the gloom.

"Good morning, sir, and did you sleep well?" Mary cried brightly.

"Yes, thank you," Mr. De Wit replied. "Er—I was wondering where I might get some laundry done?"

"Bless you, sir, we don't have Earth-style laundries up here," said Mary. "Best you think of it as a sort of dry-cleaning. Leave it in a pile on your bunk and I'll send one of the girls up for it later." She cleared her throat. "And this is my friend Mr. Brick. Brick is the, ahem, *colorful local character* who sold me the diamond. Aren't you, dear?"

"That's right," said the Brick, without batting an eye. "Howdy, stranger."

"Oh, great!" Mr. De Wit pulled his buke from his coat. "Would you be willing to record a statement to that effect?"

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"Sure," said the Brick, kicking the bar stool next to him. "Have a seat. We'll talk."

Mr. De Wit sat down and set up his buke, and Mary drew him a pint of batch and left them talking. She was busily sweeping sand when Manco entered through the airlock and came straight up to her. His face was impassive, but his black eyes glinted with anger.

"You'd better come see something, Mama," he said.

"I went to replace the old lock seal like you told me," he said, pointing. "Then I looked through. No point now, huh?"

Mary stared at her Allotment. It had never been a sight to rejoice the eye, but now it was the picture of all desolation. Halfway down the acreage someone had slashed through the vizio wall, and the bitter Martian winds had widened the tear and brought in a freight of red sand, which duned in long ripples over what remained of her barley, now blasted and shriveled with cold. Worse still, it was trampled: for someone had come in through the hole and excavated here and there, long channels orderly cut in the red clay or random potholes. There were Outside-issue bootprints all over.

She said something heartfelt and unprintable.

"You think it was the BAC?" said Manco.

"Not likely," Mary said. "They don't know about the diamond, do they? This has *Clan Morrigan* written all over it."

"We can't report this, can we?"

Mary shook her head. "That'd be just what the BAC would want to hear. 'Vandalism, is it, Ms. Griffith? Well, what can you expect in a criminal environment such as what you've fostered here, Ms. Griffith? Perhaps you'd best crawl off into the sand and die, Ms. Griffith, and stop peddling your nasty beer and Goddess-worshipping superstitions and leave Mars to decent people, Ms. Griffith!' That's what they'd say."

"And they'd say, 'What were people digging for?' too," said Manco gloomily.

"So they would." Mary felt a chill. "I think I must speak with Mr. De Wit again."

"What should I do here?"

"Seal up the vizio with duct tape," Mary advised. "Then get the quaddy out and plough it all under."

"Quaddy needs a new air filter, Mama."

"Use a sock! Works just as well," said Mary, and stamped away back up the Tube.

Manco surveyed the ruined Allotment and sighed. Resolving to offer Her another rose of his heart's blood if She would render assistance, he wrestled the rusting quaddy out of its garage and squatted to inspect the engine.

Mr. De Wit and the Brick were still where Mary had left them, deep in conversation; the Brick seemed to be regaling Mr. De Wit with exciting tales of his bipolar journeys for carbon dioxide and water ice. Mr. De Wit was listening with his mouth slightly open.

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Mary started toward him, intent on a hasty conference, but Rowan stepped into her path.

"Mum, Mr. Cochevelou wants a word," she said in an undertone.

"Cochevelou!" Mary said, turning with a basilisk glare, and spotted him in his customary booth. He smiled at her, rubbing his fingertips together in a nervous kind of way, and seemed to shrink back into the darkness as she advanced on him.

"Eh, I imagine you've come from your old Allotment," he said. "That's just what I wanted to talk to you about, Mary dearest."

"Don't you Mary Dearest me!" she told him.

"Darling! Darling. You've every right to be killing mad, so you do. I struck the bastards to the floor with these two hands when I found out, so I did. 'You worthless thieving pigs!' I said to them. 'Aren't you ashamed of yourselves?' I said. 'Here we are in this cold hard place and do we stick together in adversity, as true Celts ought? Won't the English laugh and nod at us when they find out?' That's what I said."

"Words are all you have for me, are they?" said Mary icily.

"No indeed, dear," said Cochevelou, looking wounded. "Aren't I talking compensation? But you have to understand that some of the lads come of desperate stock, and there's some will always envy another's good fortune bitterly keen."

"How'd they know about my good fortune?" Mary demanded.

"Well, your Mona might have told our DeWayne," said Cochevelou. "Or it might have gone about the Tube some other way, but good news travels fast, eh? And there's no secrets up here anyway, as we both know. The main thing is, we're dealing with it. The clan has voted to expel the dirty beggars forthwith—"

"Much good that does me!"

"And to award you Finn's Field free and clear, all further payments waived," Cochevelou added.

"That's better." Mary relaxed slightly.

"And perhaps we'll find other little ways to make it up to you," said Cochevelou, pouring her a cup of her own Black Label. "I can send work parties over to mend the damage. New vizio panels for you, what about it? And free harrowing and manuring that poor tract of worthless ground."

"I'm sure you'd love to get your boys in there digging again," Mary grumbled, accepting the cup.

"No, no; they're out, as I told you," said Cochevelou. "We're shipping their raggedy asses back to Earth on the next flight."

"Are you?" Mary halted in the act of raising the cup to her lips. She set it down. "And where are you getting the money for that, pray?"

Cochevelou winced.

"An unexpected inheritance?" he suggested, and dodged the cup that came flying at him.

"You hound!" Mary cried. "They'll have an unexpected inheritance sewn into their suits, won't they? Won't they, you black beast?"

"If you'd only be mine, all this wouldn't matter," said Cochevelou wretchedly, crawling from the booth and making for the airlock with as

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much dignity as he could muster. "We could rule Mars together, you know that, don't you?"

He didn't wait for an answer, but pulled his mask on and fled through the airlock. Mary nearly pitched the bottle after him too and stopped herself, aware that all her staff, as well as Mr. De Wit and the Brick, were staring at her.

"Mr. De Wit," she said, as decorously as she could, "May I have a word with you in private?"

"That was sooner than I expected," said Mr. De Wit, when she'd told him all about it.

"You expected this?" Mary said.

"Of course," he replied, tugging unhappily at his beard. "Have you ever heard of the Gold Rush of 1849? I don't know if you know much American history, Ms. Griffith—"

"Gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill," Mary snapped.

"Yes, and do you know what happened to Mr. Sutter? Prospectors destroyed his farm. He was ruined."

"I won't be ruined," Mary declared. "If I have to put a guard on that field every hour of the day and night, I'll do it."

"It's too late for that," Mr. De Wit explained. "The secret can't be kept any longer, you see? More Martian settlers will be putting more red diamonds on the market. The value will go down, but that won't stop the flood of people coming up here hoping to get rich."

And he was right.

For five years, there had been one shuttle from Earth every three months. They might have come more often; technological advances over the last couple of decades had greatly trimmed travel time to Mars. There just hadn't been any reason to waste the money.

The change came slowly at first, and was barely noticed: an unaccustomed distant thunder of landing jets at unexpected moments, a stranger wandering wide-eyed into the Empress at odd hours. More lights glinting under the vizio dome of BAC headquarters after dark.

Then the change sped up.

More shuttles, arriving all hours, and not just the big green BAC ships but vessels of all description, freelance transport services competing. More strangers lining the bar at the Empress, shivering, gravity-sick, unable to get used to the smell or the taste of the beer or the air but unable to do without either.

Strangers wandering around outside the Tubes, inadequately suited, losing their sense of direction in the sandstorms and having to be rescued on a daily basis by some opportunistic Celt who charged for his kindness: "Just to pay for the oxygen expenditure, see?" Strangers losing or abandoning all manner of useful odds and ends in the red desolation, to be gleefully salvaged by the locals. Mary's back bar became a kind of shrine to the absurd items people brought from Earth, such as a digital perpetual calendar geared to 365 days in a year, a pair of ice skates, a ballroom dancing trophy, and a snow globe depicting the Historic Astoria Column of Astoria, Oregon.

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"I can't think why you advised me to leave," Mary said to Mr. De Wit, as he sat at the bar. "We've never done so well!"

Mr. De Wit shook his head gloomily, staring into the holoscreen above his buke. "It's all a matter of timing," he said, and drained his mug of Ares Lager.

"Let me pour you another, sweetheart," said Alice, fetching away the empty. Mary watched her narrowly. To everyone's astonishment but Alice's, Mr. De Wit had proposed marriage to her. As far as Mary had been able to tell, it had happened somehow because Alice had been the one delegated to collect his laundry, and had made it a point to personally deliver his fresh socks and thermals at an inappropriate hour, and one thing had led to another, as it generally did in the course of human history, whether on Earth or elsewhere.

He accepted another mug from her now with a smile. Mary shrugged to herself and was about to retreat in a discreet manner when there was a tremendous crash in the kitchen.

When she got to the door, she beheld the Heretic crouched in a corner, rocking herself to and fro, white and silent. On the floor lay Mary's largest kettle and a great quantity of wasted water, sizzling slightly as it interacted with the dust that had been tracked in.

"What's this?" said Mary.

The Heretic turned her face. "*They're coming*," she whispered. "*And the mountain's on fire.*"

Mary felt a qualm, but said quietly: "Your vision's a bit late. The place is already full of newcomers. What, did you think you saw something in the water? There's nothing in there but red mud. Pick yourself up and—"

There was another crash, though less impressive, and a high-pitched yell of excitement. Turning, Mary beheld Mr. De Wit leaping up and down, fists clenched above his head.

"We did it," he cried. "We found a buyer!"

"How much?" Mary asked instantly.

"Two million punts Celtic," he replied, gasping after his exertion. "Mitsubishi, of course, because we aimed all the marketing at them. I just wasn't sure—I've instructed Polieos to take their offer. I hope that meets with your approval, Ms. Griffith? Because, you know, no one will ever get that kind of money for a Martian diamond again."

"Won't they?" Mary was puzzled by his certainty. "Whyever not?"

"Well—" Mr. De Wit coughed dust, took a gulp from his pint and composed himself. "Because most of the appeal was in the novelty, and in the story behind your particular stone, and—and timing, like I said. Now the publicity will work against the market. Those stones that were stolen out of your field will go on sale at inflated prices, you see? Everyone will expect to make a fortune."

"But they won't?"

"No, because—" Mr. De Wit waved vaguely. "Do you know why they say *A diamond is forever*? Because it's murder to unload the damned things, in the cold hard light of day. No dealer ever buys back a stone they've sold. It took a fantastic amount of work to sell the Big Mitsubishi. We were very, very lucky. Nobody else will have our luck."

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He stooped forward and put his hands on her shoulders. "Now, please. Follow my advice. Take out a little to treat yourself and put the rest in high-yield savings, or very careful investments."

"Or I'll tell you what you could do," said a bright voice from the bar.

They turned to see the Brick in the act of downing a pint. He finished, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and said: "You could sink a magma well up the hill on Mons Olympus, and start your own energy plant. That'd really screw the BAC! And make you a shitload of money on the side.

"Magma well?" Mary repeated.

"Old-style geothermal energy. Nobody's used it since Fusion, because Fusion's cheaper, but it'd work up here. The BAC's been debating a plant, but their committees are so brain-constipated they'll never get around to it!" The Brick rose to his feet in his enthusiasm. "Hell, all you'd need would be a water-drilling rig, to start with. And you'd need to build the plant and lay pipes, but you can afford that now, right? Then you'd have all the power you'd want to grow all the barley you'd want *and* sell it to other settlers!"

"I suppose I could do that, couldn't I?" said Mary slowly. She looked up at Mr. De Wit. "What do you think? Could I make a fortune with a magma well?"

Mr. De Wit sighed.

"Yes," he said. "I have to tell you that you could."

The only difficult part was getting the drilling rig.

Cochevelou looked uncertainly at Mona, who had perched herself on one of his knees, and then at Rowan, who was firmly stationed on the other with her fingers twined in his beard.

"Please, Mr. Cochevelou, my dear dearest?" Mona crooned.

Mary leaned forward and filled his glass, looking him straight in the eye.

"You said we might rule Mars together," she said. "Well, this is the way to do it. You and me together, eh, pooling our resources as we've always done?"

"You staked claim to the whole volcano?" he said, incredulous. "Bloody honking huge Mons Olympus?"

"Nothing in the laws said I couldn't, if I had the cash for the filing fee, which, being the richest woman on Mars now, I *had,* of course," Mary replied. "Nothing in the tiniest print said I was even obliged to tell the BAC. I had my fine lawyer *and* nearly son-in-law Mr. De Wit file with the Tri-Worlds Settlement Bureau, and they just said Yes, Ms. Griffith, here's your virtual title and good luck to you. Doubtless sniggering in their First World sleeves and wondering what a silly widow woman will do with a big frozen cowpat of a volcano. They'll see!"

"But—" Cochevelou paused and took a drink. His pause lost him ground, for Mary shoved Mona out of the way and took her place on his knee, bringing her gimlet stare, and her bosom, closer.

"Think of it, darling man!" she said. "Think how we've been robbed, and kept down, and made to make do with the dry leavings while the English got the best of everything! Haven't we always triumphed by turning ad-

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versity to our own uses? And so it'll be now. Your ironworks and your strong lads with my money and Mars's own hot heart itself beating for us in a thunderous counterpoint to our passion!"

"Passion?" said Cochevelou, somewhat dazed but beginning to smile.

"She's got him," Chiring informed the others, who were lurking in the kitchen. Mr. Morton gave a cheer, which was promptly shut off as Manco and the Heretic clapped their hands over his mouth. Chiring put his eye to the peephole again.

"They're shaking hands," he said. "He just kissed her. She hasn't slapped him. She's saying . . . something about Celtic Energy Systems."

"It's the beginning of a new world!" whispered Mr. Morton. "There's never been money on Mars, but—but—now we can have Centres for the Performing Arts!"

"We can have a lot more than that," said Manco.

"They could found a whole other city," said Chiring, stepping back. "You know? What a story this is going to be!"

"We could attract artistes," said Mr. Morton, stars in his eyes. "*Culture!*"

"We could be completely independent, if we bought vizio and water pumps, and got enough land under cultivation," Manco pointed out. A look of shock crossed his face. "I could grow *real* roses."

"You could," Chiring agreed, whipping out his jotpad. "*Interviews with the Locals: What Will Money Mean to the New Martians?* By your News Martian. Okay, Morton, you'd want performing arts, and *you'd* develop Martian horticulture." He nodded at Manco and then glanced over at the Heretic. "How about you? What do you hope to get out of this?"

"A better place to hide," she said bleakly, raising her head as she listened to the rumble of the next shuttle arriving.

It was still possible to ride an automobile on Mars, though they had long since become illegal on Earth and Luna.

A great deal of preparation was necessary, to be sure: one had first to put on a suit of thermals, and then a suit of cotton fleece, and then a suit of bubblefilm, and then a final layer of quilted Outside wear. Boots with ankle locks were necessary too, and wrist-locked gauntlets. One could put on an old-fashioned-looking aquarium helmet, if one had the money; people at Mary's economic level made do with a snugly fitting hood, a face mask hooked up to a back tank, and kitchen grease mixed with UV blocker daubed thickly on anything that the mask didn't cover.

Having done this, one could then clamber through an airlock and motor across Mars, in a rickety CeltCart 600 with knobbed rubber tires and a top speed of eight kilometers an hour. It was transportation neither dignified nor efficient, since one was swamped with methane fumes and bounced about like a pea in a football. Nevertheless, it beat walking, or being blown sidelong in an antigravity car. And it really beat climbing.

Mary clung to the rollbar and reflected that today was actually a fine day for a jaunt Outside, considering. Bright summer sky overhead like peaches and cream, though liver-dark storm clouds raged far down the small horizon behind. Before, of course, was only the gentle but near-

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eternal swell of Mons Olympus, and the road that had been made by the expedient of rolling or pushing larger rocks out of the way.

"Mind the pit, Cochevelou," she admonished. Cochevelou exhaled his annoyance so forcefully that steam escaped from the edges of his mask, but he steered clear of the pit and so on up the winding track to the drill site.

The lads were hard at work when they arrived at last, having had a full hour's warning that the Cart was on its way up, since from the high slide of the slope one could see half the world spread out below, and its planetary curve too. There was therefore a big mound of broken gravel and frozen mudslurry, industriously scraped from the drillbits, to show for their morning's work. Better still, there was a thin spindrift of steam coming off the rusty pipes, coalescing into short-lived frost as it fell.

"Look, Mama!" said Manco proudly, gesturing at the white. "Heat *and* water!"

"So I see," said Mary, crawling from the car. "Who'd have thought mud could be so lovely, eh? And we've brought you a present. Unload it, please."

Matelot and the others who had been industriously leaning on their shovels sighed, and set about unclamping the bungees that had kept the great crate in its place on the back of the CeltCart. The crate was much too big to have traveled on a comparative vehicle on Earth without squashing it, and even so the Cart's wheels groaned and splayed, though as the men lifted the crate like so many ants hoisting a dead cricket the wheels bowed gratefully back. The cords had bit deep into the crate's foamcast during the journey, and the errant Martian breezes had just about scoured the label off with flying grit, but the logo of Third Word Alternatives, Inc. could still be made out.

"So this is our pump and all?" inquired Padraig, squinting at it through his goggles.

"This is the thing itself, pump and jenny and all but the pipes to send wet hot gold down the mountain to us," Cochevelou told him.

"And the pipes've been ordered," Mary added proudly. "And paid for! And here's Mr. Morton to exercise his great talents building a shed to house it all."

Mr. Morton unfolded himself from the rear cockpit and tottered to his feet, looking about with wide eyes. The speaker in his mask was broken, so he merely waved at everyone and went off at once to look at the foundations Manco had dug.

"And lastly," said Mary, lifting a transport unit that had been rather squashed under the seat, "Algemite sandwiches for everybody! And free rounds on the house when you're home tonight, if you get the dear machine hooked up before dark."

"Does it come with instructions?" Matelot inquired, puffing as he stood back from the crate.

"It promised an easy-to-follow holomanual in five languages, and if one isn't in there we're to mail the manufacturers at once," Mary said. "But they're a reputable firm, I'm sure."

"Now, isn't that a sight, my darling?" said Cochevelou happily, turning to look down the slope at the Tharsis Bulge. "Civilization, what there is of it anyhow, spread out at our feet like a drunk to be rolled."

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Mary gazed down, and shivered. From this distance, the Settlement Dome looked tiny and pathetic, even with its new housing annex. The network of Tubes seemed like so many glassy worms, and her own house might have been a mudball on the landscape. It was true that the landing port had recently been enlarged, which made it more of a handkerchief than a postage stamp of pink concrete. Still, little stone cairns dotted the wasteland here and there, marking the spots where luckless prospectors had been cached because nobody had any interest in shipping frozen corpses back to Earth.

But she lifted her chin and looked back at it all in defiance.

"Think of our long acres of green," she said. "Think of our own rooms steam-heated. Lady bless us, think of having a hot *bath!*"

Which was such an obscenely expensive pleasure on Mars that Cochevelou gasped and slid his arm around her, moved beyond words, and they clung together for quite a while on that cold prominence before either of them noticed the tiny figure making its way up the track from the Empress.

"Who's that, then?" Mary peered down at it, disengaging herself abruptly from Cochevelou's embrace. "Is that Mr. De Wit?"

It was Mr. De Wit.

By the time they reached him in the CeltCart, he was walking more slowly, and his eyes were standing out of his face so they looked fair to pop through his goggles, but he seemed unstoppable.

"WHAT IS IT?" Mary demanded, turning her volume all the way up. "IS SOMETHING GONE WRONG WITH ALICE?"

Mr. De Wit shook his head, slumping forward on the Cart's fender. He cranked up his volume as far as it went too and gasped, "LAWYER—"

"YES!" Mary said irritably, "YOU'RE A LAWYER!"

"*OTHER* LAWYER!" said Mr. De Wit, pointing back down the slope at the Empress.

Mary bit her lip. "YOU MEAN—" she turned her volume down, reluctant to broadcast words of ill omen. "There's a lawyer from somebody else? The BAC, maybe?"

Mr. De Wit nodded, crawling wearily into the back seat of the Cart.

"Oh, bugger all," growled Cochevelou. "Whyn't you fight him off then, as one shark to another?"

"Did my best," wheezed Mr. De Wit. "Filed appeal. But you have to make mark."

Mary said something unprintable. She reached past Cochevelou and threw the Cart into neutral to save gas. It went bucketing down the slope, reaching such a velocity near the bottom that Mr. De Wit found himself praying for the first time since his childhood.

Somehow they arrived with no more damage done than a chunk of lichen sheared off the airlock wall, but they might have taken their time, for all the good it did them.

The lawyer was not Hodges from the Settlement, whose particular personal interests Mary knew to a nicety and whom she might have quelled with a good hard stare. No, this lawyer was a solicitor from London, no less, immaculate in an airlock ensemble from Bond Street and his white

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skullcap of office. He sat poised on the very edge of one of Mary's settles, listening diffidently as Mr. De Wit (who had gone quite native by now, stooped, wheezing, powdered with red dust, his beard lank with face-grease and sand) explained the situation, which was, to wit:

Whereas, the British Ares Company had operated at an average annual loss to its shareholders of 13 percent of the original estimated minimum annual profit for a period of five (Earth) calendar years, and

Whereas, it had come to the attention of the Board of Directors that there were hitherto-unknown venues of profit in the area of mineral resources, and

Whereas, having reviewed the original Terms of Settlement and Allotment as stated in the Contract for the Settlement and Terraforming of Ares, and having determined that the contractment of any and all allotted agricultural zones was contingent upon said zones contributing to the common wealth of Mars and the continued profit of its shareholders, and

Whereas, the aforesaid Contract specified that in the event that revocation of all Leases of Allotment was determined to be in the best interests of the shareholders, the Board of Directors retained the right to the exercise of Eminent Domain,

Therefore, the British Ares Company respectfully informed Mary Griffith that her lease was revoked and due notice of eviction from all areas of Settlement would follow within thirty (Earth) calendar days. She was, of course, at full liberty to file an appeal with the proper authorities.

"Which you are in the process of doing," said Mr. De Wit, and picked up a text plaquette from the table. "Here it is. Sign at the bottom."

"Can she read?" the solicitor inquired, stifling a yawn. Mary's lip curled.

"Ten years at Mount Snowdon University says I can, little man," she informed him, and having run her eye down the document, she thumbprinted it firmly. "So take that and stick it where appeals are filed, if you please." She handed the plaquette to the solicitor, who accepted it without comment and put it in his briefcase.

"Hard luck, my dear," said Cochevelou, pouring himself a drink. "I'll just quell my thirst and then edge off home, shall I?"

"Are you a resident of the Clan Morrigan?" the solicitor inquired, fixing him with a fishy eye.

"I am." Cochevelou stared back.

"Then, can you direct me to their current duly elected chieftain?"

"That would be him," said Mary.

"Ah." The solicitor drew a second plaquette from his briefcase and held it out. "Maurice Cochevelou? You are hereby advised that—"

"Is that the same as what you just served *her* with?" Cochevelou demanded, slowly raising fists like rusty cannon balls.

"In short, sir, yes, you are evicted," replied the solicitor, with remarkable sangfroid. "Do you wish to appeal as well?"

"Do you wish to take a walk Outside, you little—"

"He'll appeal as well," said Mary firmly, and, grabbing the second plaquette, she took Cochevelou's great sooty thumb and stamped the plaquette firmly. "There now. Run along, please."

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"You can tell your masters they've got a fight on their hands, you whey-faced soy-eating little timeserver!" roared Cochevelou at the solicitor's retreating back. The airlock shut after him and Cochevelou picked up a mug and hurled it at the lock, where it shattered into pink fragments.

"We'll burn their Settlement Dome over their heads!" he said, stamping like a bull in a stall. "We'll drive our kine through their spotless tunnels, eh, and give 'em methane up close and personal, won't we just!"

"We will not," said Mary. "We'll ruin 'em with lawsuits, won't we, Mr. De Wit?"

"I don't think you're going to be able to do either," said Mr. De Wit, sagging onto a bench. "They've already found new tenants to work the land, you see. The Martian Agricultural Collective will be coming up soon. Very much more the kind of people they would rather see living up here. And the BAC itself is dissolving. The Board of Directors will be running the whole operation from Earth now, under the corporate name ARECO. I told you things would change."

"The cowards," growled Cochevelou. "So they'll evaporate into mist when we swing at them, will they?"

"Then what's the point of appealing?" Mary asked.

"It will buy you time," Mr. De Wit replied, raising his gray exhausted face. Alice brought him a cup of hot tea, setting it before him. She began to massage his bowed shoulders.

"Of course," Alice said quietly, "We *could* all go home again."

"This is my home," said Mary, bridling.

"Well, it isn't mine," said Alice defiantly. "And it isn't Eli's, either. He's only staying up here to help you because he's kind. But we *will* go back to Earth, Mum, and if you want to see your grandchild, you'll have to go too."

"Alice, don't say that to your mother," said Mr. De Wit, putting his face in his hands.

Mary looked at her daughter stone-faced.

"So you're playing that game, are you?"

"I'm not playing any game! I just—"

"Go back to Earth, then. Be happy there, if you're capable of being happy. Neither you nor anybody else alive will call my bluff," said Mary, not loudly but in tones that formed ice around the edges of Mr. De Wit's tea. He groaned.

"And what'm *I* to do?" said Cochevelou, looking horrified as the full impact hit him. "Mine will call for a vote. Three votes of no-confidence for a chieftain and there's a new chieftain."

"Overwhelm them with persuasion, man," Mary told him. "Spin them a tale about our glorious new future up the slope in—in—"

"Mars Two," said Mr. De Wit, staring into his teacup.

Three: The Shining City on the Hill

Cochevelou survived the vote. That was one good thing. Another was that Celtic Energy Systems got its pumping station built and online.

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Though the easy-to-follow assembly holo was indeed in five languages, they turned out to be Telugu, Swahili, Pashto, Malayalam, and Hakka. Fortunately, most of the orderlies in the hospital where Mr. Morton had grown up had spoken Swahili, and he had picked up enough to follow assembly directions.

Of course, the pipes hadn't arrived from Earth yet, so there was no way to send water, heat or steam anywhere; but Mr. Morton had fabricated an elegant little neoGothic structure to house the pumping station, a sort of architectural prototype, as he explained, for the Edgar Allan Poe Memorial Cabaret, and he was already happily designing the Downtown Arts Plaza and Promenade.

"It's the backlash," said the Brick gloomily, nursing his beer. "Too many freaks up here for the BAC to cope with, so they'll just scrap the whole Settlement and ship up their own hand-picked squares. Have you seen any of these guys from the Martian Agricultural Collective?"

"I have not," said Mary, looking over his head to count the house. Three booths occupied, and only two seats at the bar; not good, for a Friday night. "They're not drinkers, seemingly."

"They're not drinkers,' the Brick affirmed. "Their idea of fun is singing anthems to Agrarian Socialism, okay? Bunch of shaven-headed humorless bastards."

"Oh, dear," said Mary. "No beer, is it? And are they monkish as well?"

"No," said the Brick, shuddering. "They got their own ladies. They shave their heads too. Seriously political."

"So they won't be inclined to stop by for a chat," said Mary thoughtfully. "How's your job security, then, under the new regime?"

The Brick grinned. "They can round up all the other loonies and ship 'em home, but they'll still need Ice Haulers, right? And we've got the Bipolar Boys and Girls Union. They mess with us, we'll drive a dozen six-ton flatbeds through Settlement Dome and Mars 'em."

Marsing was a local custom. It resembled mooning, but was uglier.

"I'm sure they won't dare mess with you, Mr. Brick," said Mary.

"Hey, let 'em," said the Brick, waving a massive hand. "I like a good fight."

Wreathed in an air of pleasant anticipation and carbon dioxide, he downed the last of his beer and headed out, pausing by the airlock to mask up. As he exited, two other people came in from the Tube.

They removed their masks and stared around at the Empress. Their gazes dwelt with approval a moment on the votive shrine to the Mother, in its alcove; traveled on and grew somewhat cold looking on the great brewtanks that loomed at the back of Mary's domain. They were both pear-shaped women, one elderly and one youngish, and Mary wondered what the hell they were doing on Mars.

"Are you perhaps lost, ladies?" she inquired in English.

"Oh, I don't think so," said the elder of the two. She advanced on the bar, closely followed by her associate. Somewhere in the gloom behind Mary, there was a gasp and the clang of a dropped skillet.

"You must be Mary Griffith," said the elder. "I am Mother Glenda and this is Mother Willow. We're with the Ephesian Mission."

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"Indeed? How nice," said Mary. "Visiting from Luna, then?"

"Oh, no," said Mother Glenda. "We've come to stay. Blessed be."

"Blessed be," Mary echoed, feeling slightly uneasy as she looked into Mother Glenda's face, which was pink-cheeked and jolly-smiling, though there was a certain hard glint in her eyes.

"The Church felt it was time to bring the Goddess to this desolate place," said Mother Willow, who had a high breathless voice. "Especially with all these desperate people seeking their fortunes here. Because, there are really hardly any red diamonds up here after all, are there? So they'll need spiritual comfort when the vain quest for worldly riches fails them. And besides, it's *Mars*."

"Mythologically the planet of war and masculine brutality," explained Mother Glenda.

"Ah," said Mary.

"And the Martian Agricultural Collective are all atheists, you see, so it's an even greater challenge," said Mother Willow earnestly. "You can imagine how pleased we were to learn that there was already a Daughter resident up here. And how outraged we were to hear that you have been the victim of paternalist oppression!"

"I wouldn't say I've been a victim," Mary replied, grinning. "I'd say I've given as good as I've got, and I'm still here."

"*Good* answer," said Mother Glenda. "Holy Mother Church has followed your struggle with some interest, daughter."

"Really," said Mary, not much liking the sound of that.

"And, of course, one of the first things we want to do is offer our support," Mother Willow assured her. "Holy Mother Church will help you fight your eviction. Our legal and financial resources are practically unlimited, you know, and we have publicists who would love to tell your story. The Goddess cares for Her own, but most especially for those who have suffered persecution in Her name!"

Mary caught her breath. She thought of the Diana of Luna affair, that had cost the British Luna Company millions of pounds and kilometers of real estate. And now the Church must be looking to duplicate that success here. . . .

"Oh, my, what a lovely thought," she said dreamily. "This might be ever so much fun. Please, allow me to offer you a nice mug of—er—tea."

Everyone in three worlds knew the story: how, in the early days of Luna's settlement, a devout Ephesian named Lavender Dragonsbane had found a solid silver statue of the Goddess buried on the moon. The British Lunar Company claimed that what she had found was, in fact, a vaguely woman-shaped lump of nickel ore. It was given to archaeologists to study, and then other parties (including MI5) had stepped in to demand a look at it, and somehow it had mysteriously vanished in transit from one set of experts to another.

The Ephesian Church had sued the BLC, and the BLC had sued back. Lavender Dragonsbane had a vision wherein the Goddess told her to build a shrine on the spot where she had found the statue. The BLC claimed that the statue had been deliberately planted by the Ephesians

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on that spot because it happened to be valuable real estate they wanted.

However, in calling what had been found a *statue,* the BAC had contradicted their earlier statement that it had been nothing but a curiously shaped bit of rock. The Tri-Worlds Council for Integrity found for the Ephesian Church on points. Now the Church owned half the Moon.

". . . and *you* could be our next Lavender Dragonsbane, daughter," said Mother Willow, setting aside her tea.

"Well, that would spoke the BAC's wheels and no mistake," said Mary giddily. "Or Areco or whatever they're calling themselves now."

"The perennial oppressors," said Mother Willow, smiling, "brought to their knees by the simple faith of one woman. Blessed be!"

"Blessed be!" Mary echoed, visions of sweet revenge dancing through her head.

"Of course, you understand there will have to be some changes," said Mother Glenda.

"Yes, of course," said Mary, and then: "Excuse me?"

Mother Willow coughed delicately. "We have been given to understand that your staff is nearly all male. We can scarcely present you as Her defender on Mars when you perpetuate hiring bias, can we, daughter? And Holy Mother Church is *very* concerned at rumors that one of your employees is a . . . Christian."

"Oh, Manco!" said Mary. "No, you don't understand. He really worships Her, you see, only it's just in the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And everybody knows that's some kind of Red Indian flower goddess really, and nothing to do with paternalist oppressors or anything like that and after all he's a, er, Native American, isn't he? Member of a viciously oppressed ethnic minority? And he's built Her a big shrine and everything in a sacred grotto hereabouts."

Mother Willow brightened. "Yes, I see! That makes it an entirely different matter. I expect our publicists could do very well with that." She pulled out a jotpad and made a few brief notes. "One of Her faithful sons escaping to Mars from the brutal lash of Earth prejudice, yes. . . ."

"And as for the rest of 'em being male," said Mary, "Well, I have to take what I can get up here, don't I? And they're not bad fellows at all. And anyway, out of the whole Settlement, there's only—" She had been about to say, *There's only the Heretic wanted a job,* but caught herself and went on— "Er, only so many women on Mars, after all."

"That's true," said Mother Willow graciously.

"And we *quite* understand you have been placed in a position where it was necessary to fight the enemy with his own weapons," said Mother Glenda. "However, all of that—" and she pointed at the brewtanks, "must stop, immediately."

"I beg your pardon?" said Mary.

"There is to be no more traffic in controlled substances," said Mother Glenda.

"But it's only beer!" Mary cried. "And it's not illegal in the Celtic Federation, anyway, of which I am a citizen, see? So I'm not doing anything wrong."

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"Not under the statutes of *men*," said Mother Glenda. "But how can you feel you are doing Her will by serving a deadly toxin like alcohol to the impoverished working classes of Mars? No, daughter. Holy Mother Church wants to see those tanks dismantled before she grants her aid."

"But what would I serve my regulars?" Mary demanded.

"Herbal teas and nourishing broths," suggested Mother Willow. "*Healthful* drinks."

Mary narrowed her eyes. Perhaps sensing an explosion imminent, Mother Willow changed the subject and said delicately:

"And there is one other matter. . . ."

"What's that?" said Mary stonily.

"There was an unfortunate incident on Luna," said Mother Willow. "Tragic, really. One of our faithful daughters was injured in an accident. The poor creature was confused—we're certain now there was brain damage—but it would appear that, in her dementia, she said certain things that were interpreted in entirely the wrong way. Misunderstandings will happen . . . but Holy Mother Church seeks now to bring her child home."

"We understand she works for you here," said Mother Glenda.

"Er," said Mary. "Well. She has done, but . . . you must know she's a bit unreliable. I never know when she'll turn up. I thought she was a heretic, anyway."

"She doesn't know what she's talking about," said Mother Glenda quickly. "She ought to be in—that is, on medication for her condition."

"You mean you want to put her in hospital," said Mary.

"Oh, no, no, no!" Mother Willow assured her. "Not one of those dreadful state-run homes at all. The Church has a special place for its afflicted daughters."

I'll just bet you do, Mary thought. She sat mulling over the price tag on her future for a long moment. At last she stood up.

"Ladies, I think you'd best go now."

When they had left at last, when the flint-edged smiles and veiled threats and sniffs of mutual disapproval had been exchanged, Mary drew a deep breath. "Missionaries," she muttered. Then she made her way back into the stygian blackness of her kitchen.

She found the Heretic at last, wedged behind the pantry cupboard like a human cockroach, by the sound her ocular implant was making as it telescoped in and out.

"They're gone now," Mary informed her.

"Can't come out," the Heretic replied hoarsely.

"You don't want to go back to Earth with them?"

The Heretic didn't answer.

"You'd get lots of nice drugs," Mary pointed out. The Heretic shifted, but was still mute.

"Look, they're not going to hurt you. This is modern times, see? They even hinted your excommunication might be revoked. Wouldn't you like that?"

"No," said the Heretic. "They think He'll talk for them. But He won't."

"Who won't talk for them?" Mary asked, settling back on her heels. "Your, er, sort of god thing?"

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"Yes."

"Why would they want him to talk to them?"

There was a silence, filled gradually with the sound of the cupboard rattling and the whirring noise of the Heretic's eye. Finally she controlled her trembling and gasped:

"Because of what He said when I was in the House of Gentle Persuasion. He told them—something was going to happen. And it happened just like He said."

"You mean, like a prophecy?"

"*Prophecies predictions can't let this get out! Bad press Goddess knows false field day for the unbelievers paternalist voodoo conspiracies wait! We can use her!*" The Heretic's voice rose in a shriek like a rusty hinge coming unhinged. "*Stop that now or you'll put your other eye out!* But He was there. Held down His hand from the red planet and said *Come to me!* Showed me the open window and I left. Showed me a cargo freighter and I signed on. And I am here with Him and I will never go back now."

Mary stared into the shadows, just able to make out one sunken red-rimmed eye in a pale face.

"So they think you can do predictions, is that it?"

There was silence again.

"And that's why the Church wants you back," said Mary grimly.

The blur in the darkness might have nodded.

There were rumors.

Mary heard that Areco had no interest in the terraforming project, that its intention was to strip-mine for red diamonds, which were much more valuable than anyone had thought, and it had signed no real lease with the MAC.

At the same time, she heard that the red diamond rush had played out completely and that Areco was committed to backing the Martian Agricultural Collective, because terraforming was the only way anyone would ever make money on Mars.

She heard that General Director Rotherhithe had been called home in disgrace and seemed to be dying of emphysema. He was also rumored to be in perfect health and Areco's principal stockholder, calling the shots from some sinister high desk on Earth.

She heard that the Church was encountering unheard-of resistance from the MAC. She heard that the Church had signed a mutually profitable agreement with the MAC and that the new mission complex—temple, administrative offices and all—was being built even now on the other side of the settlement.

And her appeal was certain to be rejected, and her appeal was certain to succeed. Any day now.

Nothing happened. Life went on.

Then everything happened at once.

It was difficult to organize a baby shower on Mars, but Rowan had managed, on the very day before Mr. De Wit and Alice were scheduled to return to Earth.

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Alice's baby had been determined to be a girl, which was fortunate for the purposes of party décor, as most of the household ware was already pink. The Heretic had been coaxed out from under the refrigeration unit long enough to bake a cake, which rose like a pink cloud and stayed that way, thanks to Martian gravity, and while there was nothing but a tin of Golden Syrup to pour over it, the effect was impressive.

The problem of presents had been overcome as well. Rowan had commandeered Mr. De Wit's buke to catalog-shop, and simply printed out pictures of what she had ordered. The images were blurry, gray, and took most of a day to print out, but once she had them she painted them with red ochre and pink clay.

"See? Virtual presents," she said, holding up a depiction of a woolly jumper. "You don't even have to worry about luggage weight on the shuttle. This set's from me. It comes with matching bootees and a cap."

Alice blotted tears and accepted it gratefully. Beside her, Mona gazed at the heap of pictures—receiving blankets, bassinet, more woolly jumpers—and squeaked, "Oh, I can't *wait* to have a baby of my own!"

"Yes, you can, my girl," Mary told her, standing to one side with Mr. De Wit, who seemed rather stunned.

"I can't imagine what my neighbors will think when all this stuff starts arriving," he said, giggling weakly. "I've been a bachelor so many years. . . ."

"They'll get over it," said Alice, and blew her nose. "Oh, Eli, darling, *look*! An Itsy Witsy Play Set with a slide and a sandbox!"

"That's from me," said Mary, somewhat stiffly. "If the little thing has to grow up on Earth, at least she'll be able to play outdoors."

There was a sizzling moment wherein Alice glared at her mother, and Mr. Morton broke the silence by clearing his throat.

"I, er, I hope you won't mind—I prepared something." He stepped forward and offered Alice a text plaquette. "In honor of your name being Alice, I thought it would be nice—there's this marvelous old book, proscribed of course, but I recorded as much as I could remember of the poems—perhaps she'll like them. . . ."

Alice thumbed the switch and the screen lit up, and there was Mr. Morton in miniature, wringing his hands as he said: "Ahem! Jabberwocky. By Lewis Carroll. 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did gyre and gimbal in the wabe. . . ."

"My, is it in Old English?" Alice inquired politely. "How nice, Mr. Morton!"

"Well, it—"

"This is from me." Manco stepped forward, and drew from his coat a little figurine, cast from the most delicately rose-colored grit he could find. The Virgen de Guadalupe smiled demurely down at the businesslike little seraph who held her aloft on a crescent moon. "The Good Mother will look after her. You'll see."

"It's lovely! Oh, but I hope it doesn't get confiscated going through Earth customs," Alice cried.

"Just point to the crescent horns and tell 'em it's Isis," Mary advised.

Chiring stepped forward and laid a black cube on the table.

"This is a holoalbum," he said. "Candid shots of the whole family and a

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visual essay on the Martian landscape, you see? So she'll know where she's from. She'll also get a lifetime subscription to the Kathmandu *Post*."

"That's very thoughtful," said Alice, not knowing what else to say. "Thank you, Chiring."

"Ma'am? There's somebody in the airlock," said Mr. Morton.

"That'll be Lulu and Jeannemarie from the clan, I expect," said Rowan.

It wasn't.

"Ma'am." Matelot stood stiffly, twisting his air mask in his hands. Padraig Moylan and Gwil Evans flanked him, staring at the floor.

"What's this, gentlemen?" said Mary.

Matelot cleared his throat and looked from one to the other of his companions, clearly hoping one of them would speak. When neither showed any evidence of opening their mouths for the rest of eternity, he cleared his throat again and said:

"Himself sends word to say that, er, he's been made an offer he can't refuse to drop our appeal against eviction. And that even if he could refuse it, the clan has voted to accept."

"But there's still Celtic Energy Systems, my dears," said Mary, into the thunderous silence that had fallen.

"Well, that's not piped up to anything yet, you know . . . but it's not that, Ma'am," said Matelot, looking up into Mary's eyes and looking away quickly. He gulped for air and went on: "Areco wants the fruit of our labors. The ironworks and the cattle sheds and fields and all. Areco's buying 'em for a princely sum and giving us a golden rocket back to Earth, plus company shares. Every one of us rich enough to retire and live like gentry the rest of our lives. And so Himself sends you four thousand punts Celtic as compensation for Finn's fields, and hopes you will consider emigration as well."

Padraig Moylan extended a banking plaquette in a trembling hand.

The silence went on and on. Was anyone breathing? After a moment Mary reached out and took the plaquette. She glanced at it before looking back at the clansmen.

"I see," she said.

"And we'll just be going, then," said Matelot. Mary's voice hit him like an iron bar as she said:

"Is he selling *all* the fixtures?"

"What?" said Matelot weakly.

"I want to buy all your antigrav units," said Mary, handing the plaquette back. "I want them in my house by tomorrow morning. And I'll make a preemptive bid, look you, for your last harvest. Go now and tell him so."

"Yes'm," said Matelot, and collided with his fellow clansmen as they all three attempted to get out the airlock at once.

When they had gone, Mary sank down on a settle. The rest of her household stared at her. Nobody said anything until Rowan came and crouched beside her.

"Mum, it doesn't matter. Maybe Areco will make us an offer too—"

"We're not waiting to see," said Mary.

"You're going back to Earth?" asked Alice, too shocked for triumph. Mr. De Wit shook his head in silence, a sick expression in his eyes.

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"I am not," said Mary. "I said I won't be driven out and I meant it."

"Good for you!" cried Mr. Morton, and blanched as everyone turned to stare at him. Then he drew a breath and said: "She's right! We—we don't need the clan. We've got our pumping station and all that land up there. We can make a *new* place! Our own settlement, for people like us. We've already got plans for the theaters. We can expand into a hotel and restaurant and—who knows what else?" He spread out his hands in general appeal.

"Where are we going to get the people?" asked Manco.

"Well, er—you can advertise in the Kathmandu *Post*, can't you?" Mr. Morton turned to Chiring. "Tell the Sherpas all about the great job opportunities now being offered at, ah, Griffith Energy Systems! Tell them we're making a wonderful place up here where people will be free and there'll be Art and exciting adventure and, and no corporate bad guys running their lives!"

Chiring had already pulled out his jotpad before Mr. Morton had stammered to his conclusion, and was busily making notes.

"I think we can get Earth's attention," he said.

Alice sighed, gazing at her mother. She looked down at the bright pictures scattered at her feet.

"We'll stay and give you all the help we can," she said. "Won't we, Eli?"

"No." Mary got to her feet. "You're going back to Earth. No sense wasting perfectly good tickets. You can be my agents there. I'll be buying a lot of things for the new place; I want them shipped properly. And Mr. De Wit can handle all of the *thousand* lawsuits I plan to file much more effectively if he's on Earth, can't you, Mr. De Wit?"

Mr. De Wit bowed slightly. "Your servant, Madam." He coughed. "I think it might be worth your while to inquire whether Polieos is interested in buying shares in Griffith Energy Systems."

"I will, by Goddess!" Mary began to pace. She swung one arm at her available complement of men. "You lot go over to the clan now and start collecting those antigrav units. If the old bastard won't sell, tell him we're just borrowing them, but collected they must be."

"Yes, Mama." Manco picked up a crowbar and looked significantly at Chiring, Morton, and De Wit. They headed all together for the airlock.

"Girls, start packing. Everything's to be closed down and strapped in. Disconnect everything except Three Tank. Mona, you go out to the Ice Depot and let the Haulers know I'm giving away beer tonight."

"Right away, Mum!" Mona grabbed her air mask.

As Alice and Rowan hurried away to pack, Mary strode into her kitchen.

"Did you hear all that?" she called. There was a rustle from the shadows in the pantry. Finally the Heretic sidled into sight.

"Yes," she said, blinking.

"Will it work, do you think? Can we tell them all to go to hell and start our own place?" Mary demanded.

The Heretic just shrugged, drooping forward like an empty garment; then it was as though someone had seized her by the back of the neck and jerked her upright. She fixed a blazing red eye on Mary, and in a brassy voice cried:

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"For the finest in Martian hospitality, the tourist has only one real choice: Ares' premiere hotel—The Empress of Mars in Mars Two, founded by turn-of-the-century pioneer Mary Griffith and still managed by her family today. Enjoy five-star cuisine in the Empress's unique Mitsubishi Room, or discover the delights of a low-gravity hot spring sauna!"

Mary blinked. "Mars Two, is it to be? As good a name as any, I suppose. That's a grand picture of the future, but a little practical advice would be appreciated."

The strange voice took on a new intonation, sounding sly:

"All-seeing Zeus is lustful, can never be trusted; His son has a golden skull. But Ares loves a fighter."

"I don't hold with gods," said Mary stiffly. "Especially not a god of war."

Someone else smiled, using the Heretic's face. It was profoundly unsettling.

"All life has to fight to live. There's more to it than spears and empty rhetoric; she who struggles bravely has His attention."

Mary backed out of the kitchen, averting her eyes from the red grin.

"Then watch me, whoever you are, because I'm going to give Areco one hell of a fight," she muttered. "And if my cook's still in there, tell her to get to work. I'm throwing a party tonight."

By the time the sullen day dawned, the Haulers were still drunk enough to be enthusiastic.

"Jack the whole thing up on ag units, yeah!" roared the Brick. "Brilliant!"

His fellow Haulers howled their agreement.

"And just sort of walk it up the slope a ways, we thought," said Mary. "So it'll be on my claim, see."

"No, no, no, babe—" a Hauler named Tiny Reg swayed over her like a cliff about to fall. "See, that'll never work. See? Too much tail wind. Get yer arse blowed down to Valles Marinerisisis. You nona let—wanna let us—"

"Tow my house all the way up there?" asked Mary artlessly. "Oh, I couldn't ask!"

"Hell yeah!" said the Brick. "Just hook it up an' go!"

"Fink I got my glacier chains inna cabover," said a Hauler named Alf, rising from a settle abruptly and falling with a crash that sent a bow wave of spilled beer over Mary's boots. When his friends had picked him up, he wiped Phobos Porter from his face and grinned obligingly. "Jus' nip out an' see, shall I?"

"Oh, sir, how very kind," said Mary. She put out an arm and arrested Mr. Morton's flight, for he had been in the process of running to refill mugs from a pitcher. "Can we do it?" she demanded of him *sotto voce*. "You understand these things. Will the house take the stresses, without cracking like half an eggshell?"

"Er—" Mr. Morton blinked, stared around him for the first time with professional eyes. "Well—it will if we brace the interior cantilevers. We'd need, ah, telescoping struts—which we haven't got, but—"

"Where can we get them?"

"They're all in the construction storage shed on the Base. . . ." Mr. Mor-

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ton's voice trailed off. He looked down at the pitcher he was carrying. Lifting it to his mouth, he drank the last pint it contained and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "I know the code to get the shed door open," he said.

"Do you?" Mary watched him closely. His spine was stiffening. He put down the pitcher, flexed his long arms.

"Yes, I do," he said. "I'll just go off and see an oppressive corporate monolithic evil entity about a dog, shall I?"

"I think that would be a good idea," said Mary. Mr. Morton strode to the airlock, put on his mask, and paused as though to utter a dramatic exit line; then realized he should have delivered it before putting his mask on. He saluted instead, with a stiff perfect British salute, and marched away down the Tube.

"Mum?"

Mary turned and beheld Alice, swathed extravagantly for the trip Outside. Mr. De Wit stood beside her, a carryon in each hand and under either arm.

"The tickets say to get there three hours before flight time for processing," said Alice hesitantly.

"So you'd best go now," said Mary. Alice burst into tears and flung her arms around her mother's neck.

"I'm sorry I haven't been a good daughter," cried Alice. "And now I'm going to feel like a deserter too!"

"No, dearest, of course you're not a deserter," said Mary automatically, patting her on the arm. She looked over Alice's shoulder at Mr. De Wit. "You're going to go away with this nice man and bear me a lovely granddaughter, see, and perhaps someday I'll come visit you in my diamond-encrusted planet shuttle, yes?"

"I hope so," said Alice, straightening up, for her back ached. Mother and daughter looked at one another across all the resentments, the dislike, the grudges, the eternal intractable *issues* of their lives. What else was there to say?

"I love you, Mum," said Alice at last.

"I love you, too," said Mary. She went to Mr. De Wit and stood on tiptoe to kiss him, for which he bent down.

"If you desert her, I'll hunt you down and kill you with my own two hands," she murmured in his ear. He grinned.

They went away through the airlock, just as Alf the Hauler came in. Beer had frozen on his clothing and he was bleeding from his nostrils, but he seemed not to have noticed.

"Got a couple fousand meters of chain!" he announced. "'Nough to move bloody shrackin' Antartarctica!"

"You silly boy, did you go out without your air?" Mary scolded gently. "Rowan, bring a wet face flannel for our Alf. Where are your keys, dear?"

Smiling like a broken pumpkin, Alf held them up. Mary confiscated them and passed them to Manco, who masked up before ducking outside to back Alf's hauler into position.

"You can hold yer breff out dere, you know," said Alf proudly if muffledly, as Mary cleaned him up. "S'really easy once you get used to it."

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"I'm sure it is, love. Have another beer and sit still for a bit," Mary told him, and turned to Rowan. "What's happening now?"

"Uncle Brick and the others are putting the ag-units in place," said Rowan. "Is it time to disconnect Three Tank yet?"

"Not yet. They'll want a drink before they go up the slope," Mary replied.

"But, Mum, they're *drunk!*" Rowan protested.

"Can you think of a better way to get them to do it?" Mary snapped. "What chance have we got, unless they think it's a mad lark they came up with themselves? I'll get this house on my claim any damned way I can. Pour another round!"

Alice was reclining in her compartment, adjusting to the artificial gravity and staring up at the monitor above the couch. It was showing only old-fashioned flat images from the live camera mounted above the shuttleport; but the views were something to occupy her attention in the gray cubespace, and the litany of *Last time I'll ever have to look at this* was soothing her terrors.

Suddenly, something on the screen moved, and the image became surreal, impossible: there out beyond the Settlement a dome was rising, as though a hill had decided to walk. Alice cried out. Eliphal was beside her immediately, though she had had the impression he had been off seeing about their menu selections for the flight.

"What's the matter?" he asked, taking her hand in both his own.

"Where did you come from?" she asked him, bewildered. "Look out there! She's actually talked them into it!"

Clearly free now, the Empress of Mars was crawling up the slope from the Settlement Base like a gigantic snail, ponderous, of immense dignity, tugged along inexorably by no less than three freighters on separate leads of chain, each one sending up its own pink cloud of dust from roaring jets.

"Of course she's done it, Alice." How assured his voice was, and yet a little sad. "Your mother will found a city up there, on beer and rebellion. It'll be a remarkable success. You'll see, my dear."

"You really think so?" She stared into his eyes, unsettled by the expression there. He was the kindest man she had ever met, but sometimes she felt as though she were a small lost animal he'd picked up and taken home. She turned her eyes back to the monitor. "I guess we should have stayed to help her, shouldn't we?"

"No!" He put his arms around her. "You'll come home to Earth. I'll keep you safe, you and the little girl. I promised your mother."

"Oh, Earth . . ." Alice thought of green hills, and blue skies, and a blue sea breaking on a white beach . . . and her mother, and her mother's problems, finally subtracted from her life. She closed her eyes, burying her face in Eliphal's shoulder. His beard smelled of cinnamon and myrrh.

"Looks like a huge mobile tit!" whooped the Brick, peering into his rear monitor as he yanked back on the throttle.

"But it's leaking, Mum," fretted Mona, watching the vapor plumes

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emerge and dissipate instantly wherever they appeared, over every unplastered crack and vent. "Are we going to have any air at all once we get it up there?"

"We can wear our masks indoors the first few days," Mary told her, not taking her eyes off the monitor. "Wear extra thermals. Whatever we *have* to do. Hush, girl!"

In Alf's cab, Chiring was muttering into a mike, aiming his cam at the monitor for lack of a window.

"Chiring Skousen, your News Martian, here! What you're seeing is an epic journey, ladies and gentlemen, a heroic gesture in defiance of oppression!" He paused, reflected on the number of seats the NeoMaoists had won in the last Nepali parliamentary election, and went on: "The valiant working classes have risen in aid of one woman's brave stand against injustice, while the technocrats cower in their opulent shelters! Yes, the underpaid laborers of Mars still believe in such seemingly outmoded concepts as gallantry, chivalry, and courage!"

"And *beer*," said Alf. "Whoo-hoo!"

"The new battle cry of Mars, ladies and gentlemen!" Chiring ranted. "The ancient demand of *Beer for the Workers!* Now, if you're still getting the picture from the monitor clearly, you can see the slope of Mons Olympus rising before us. Our road is that paler area between the two rows of boulders. We, er, we're fighting quite a headwind, but our progress has been quite good so far, due to the several ice freighters kindly donated by the Haulers Union, which are really doing a tremendous job of moving Ms. Griffith's structure."

"Yeh, fanks," said Alf.

"And the, er, the chains used for this amazing feat are the same gauge used for tackling and hauling polar ice, so as you can imagine, they're quite strong—" Chiring babbled, keeping his camera on the forward monitor because he had spotted something he did not understand in the rear monitor. He paused again and squinted at it.

"What the hell's that?" he whispered to Alf. Alf looked up at the monitor.

"Uh-oh," he said. "That's a Strawberry."

"And, and, er, ladies and gentlemen, if you'll follow now as I turn my cam on the rear monitor, you can see one of the unique phenomena of the Martian landscape. That sort of lumpy pink thing that appears to be advancing on the Settlement Base at high speed is what the locals call a Strawberry. Let's ask local weather expert, Mr. Alfred Chipping, to explain just exactly what a Strawberry is. Mr. Chipping?"

Alf stared into the cam, blinking. "Well, it's—it's like a storm kind of a fing. See, you got yer sandstorms, wot is bad news, eh? And you got yer funny jogeraphy up here and jolligy and, er, now and again you get yer Strawberry, wot is like all free of 'em coming together to make this really fick sandstorm wot pingpongs off the hills and rocks and changes direction wifout warning."

"And—why's it that funny spotty color, Mr. Chipping?"

"Cos it's got rocks in," grunted Alf, slapping all three accelerator levers up with one blow of his ham hand.

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Chiring began to pray to Vishnu, but he did it silently, and turned his camera back to the forward monitor.

"Well, isn't that interesting!" he cried brightly. "More details on the fascinating Martian weather coming up soon, ladies and gentlemen!"

"I'll be damned," said the Brick, in a voice that meant he had abruptly sobered. "There's a Strawberry down there!"

"Where?" Mary craned her head, instinctively looking for a window, but he pointed at the rear monitor. "What's a Strawberry?"

"Trouble for somebody," the Brick replied, accelerating. "Settlement Base, looks like."

"What?"

"Oh!" said Mona. "You mean one of those cyclone things like Tiny Reg was in?"

"*What?*"

"Yeah," grunted the Brick, accelerating more.

"Tiny Reg said he was hit by one down by Terra Sirenum and it just took his freighter and picked it up with him in it and he went round and round so fast it broke all his gyros and his compass as well," Mona explained.

"Bloody Hell!" Mary began to undo her seat harness, but the Brick put out an arm to restrain her.

"You don't want to do that, babe," he said quietly.

"What do we care if it hits Settlement Base, anyroad?" Mona asked.

"Girl, your sister's down there!"

"Oh!" Mona looked up at the monitor in horror, just as the Strawberry collided with the new Temple of Diana, which imploded in a puff of crimson sand.

"Alice!" Mary screamed, searching across the monitors for a glimpse of the transport station. There was the shuttle, safe on its pad, lights still blinking in loading patterns. There it stayed safe, too, for the Strawberry turned now and shot away from the Base, tearing through Tubes as it went, and the lockout klaxons sounded as oxygen blew away white like seafoam in the burning-cold day.

"Never saw one come up on Tharsis before," was all the Brick said, steering carefully.

"But the transport station's safe!" Mona said.

"Goddess thank You, Goddess thank You, Goddess. . . . Is it getting bigger?" Mary stared fixedly at the monitor bank.

"No," said the Brick. "It's just getting closer."

Within the Empress, Mr. Morton scrambled spiderlike along the network of crossing stabilizer struts, which had telescoped out to prop the Empress' walls like glass threads in a witchball. He peered down worriedly at the floor. It was heaving and flexing rather more than he had thought it would. He looked over at the telltale he had mounted on the wall to monitor stress changes, but it was too far away to read easily.

"Are we going to be okay?" inquired Manco, remarkably stoic for a man dangling in a harness ten meters above uncertain eternity. The Heretic

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swung counterclockwise beside him, her red eye shut, listening to the clatter of her saucepans within their wired-up cupboards.

"Masks on, I think," said Mr. Morton.

"Gotcha," said Manco, and he slipped his on as Mr. Morton did the same, and gulped oxygen, and after a moment he nudged the Heretic as she orbited past. "Come on, honey, mask up. Leaks, you know?"

"Yeah," said the Heretic, not opening her eye, but she slipped on her mask and adjusted the fit.

"So what do we do?" Manco asked.

"Hang in there," said Mr. Morton, with a pitch in his giggle suggesting the long sharp teeth of impending catastrophe.

"Ha bloody Ha," said Manco, watching the walls. "We're shaking more. Are they speeding up out there?"

"Oh, no, certainly not!" Mr. Morton said. "They know better than to do that. No more than two kilometers an hour, I told them, or the stresses will exceed acceptable limits."

"Really?" Manco squinted through his goggles at a bit of rushing-by ground glimpsed through a crack on the floor that opened and shut like a mouth.

"All right, here's something we can do—" Mr. Morton edged his way along a strut to the bundle of extras. "Let's reinforce! Never hurts to be sure, does it?" He pulled out a telescoping unit and passed it hand over hand to Manco. "Just pop that open and wedge it into any of the cantilevers I haven't already braced."

Manco grabbed the strut and twisted it. It unlocked and shot out in two directions, and he swung himself up to the nearest joist to ram it into place.

"Splendid," said Mr. Morton, unlocking another strut and wedging it athwart two others.

"Should I be doing that too?" asked the Heretic, opening her good eye.

"Well, er—" Mr. Morton thought of her inability to hold on to a pan, let alone a structural element requiring strength and exactitude in placement, and, kindly as possible, he said: "Here's a thought: why don't you rappel down to that big box there on the wall, you see? And just, er, watch the little numbers on the screen and let us know if they exceed 5008. Can you do that?"

"Okay," said the Heretic, and went down to the telltale in a sort of controlled plummet. Below her, the floor winked open and gave another glimpse of Mars, which seemed to be going by faster than it had a moment earlier.

"This box says 5024," the Heretic announced.

Mr. Morton said a word he had never used before. Manco, hanging by one hand, turned to stare, and the Heretic's ocular implant began to whirr in and out, gravely disturbing the fit of her mask.

"So, Mr. Brick," said Mary in a voice calm as iron, "Am I to understand that the storm is bearing down upon us now?"

"Bearing *up,* babe, but that's it, essentially," said the Brick, not taking his eyes off the monitor.

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"Can we outrun it, Mr. Brick?"

"We might," he said, "If we weren't towing a house behind us."

"I see," said Mary.

There followed what would have been a silence, were it not for the roar of the motors and the rotors and the rising percussive howl of the wind.

"How does one release the tow lines, Mr. Brick?" Mary inquired.

"That lever right there, babe," said the Brick.

"Mum, that's our house!" said Mona.

"A house is only a thing, girl," said Mary.

"And there's still people in it! Mr. Morton stayed inside, didn't he? And Manco stayed with him! They're holding it together!"

Mary did not answer, staring at the monitor. The Strawberry loomed now like a mountain behind them, and under it the Empress seemed tiny as a horseshoe crab scuttling for cover.

"And there's always the chance the Strawberry'll hit something and go poinging off in another direction," said the Brick, in a carefully neutral voice.

"Mr. Brick," said Mary, "Basing your judgment on your years of experience hauling carbon dioxide from the icy and intolerant polar regions, could you please think carefully now and tell me exactly what chance there is that the Strawberry will, in fact, change direction and leave us alone? In your opinion, see?"

"I absolutely do not know," the Brick replied.

"Right," said Mary. She reached out and pulled down the lever to release the tow line.

A nasty twanging mess was avoided by the fact that Alf, in his freighter, had made the same decision to cast loose at nearly the same second, as had Tiny Reg (who had actually lived through a Strawberry after all and who would have cast loose even earlier, had his reflexes not been somewhat impaired by seventeen imperial pints of Red Crater Ale).

They all three sheared away in different directions, as though released from slings, speeding madly over the red stony desolation and slaloming through piles of rock the color of traffic cones. Behind them the Empress of Mars drifted to a halt, its tow lines fluttering like streamers. The Strawberry kept coming.

"5020," the Heretic announced in a trembling voice. "5010. 5000. 4050."

"*Much* better," said Mr. Morton, gasping in relief. "Good sensible fellows. Perhaps they were only giving in to the temptation to race, or something manly like that. Now, I'll just get out my flexospanner and we'll—"

"4051," said the Heretic.

"What the hell's that noi—" said Manco, just before the ordered world ended.

On thirty-seven monitors, which was exactly how many there were on the planet, horrified spectators saw the Strawberry bend over as though it were having a good look at the Empress of Mars; then they saw it leap away, only giving the Empress a swat with its tail end as it bounced off to

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play with the quailing sand dunes of Amazonia Planitia. The Empress, for its part, shot away up the swell of Mons Olympus, rotating end over end as it went.

Mr. Morton found himself swung about on his tether in ever-decreasing circles, ever closer to a lethal-looking tangle of snapping struts to which he was unfortunately still moored. The Heretic caromed past him, clinging with both arms to the stress telltale, which had torn free of the wall. Something hit him from behind like a sack of sand, and then was in front of him, and he clutched at it and looked into Manco's eyes. Manco seized hold of the nearest strut with bleeding hands, but his grasp was slick, and it took both of them scrabbling with hands and feet to fend off the broken struts and find a comparatively still bit of chaos where they clung, as the floor and ceiling revolved, revolved, slower now, revolving—

Floor upwards—

Righting itself—

Going over again, oh no, was the floor going to crack right open?—

Still tumbling—oh, don't let it settle on its side, it'll split open for sure—

Righting itself again—

And then a colossal lurch as the wind hit the Empress, only the ordinary gale force wind of Mars now but enough to sail anything mounted on ag-units, and Mr. Morton thought: *We're going to be blown to the South Pole!*

Something dropped toward them from above, and both men saw the Heretic hurtling past, still clutching the stress telltale as well as a long confusion of line that had become wrapped about her legs. She regarded them blankly in the second before she went through the floor, which opened now like split fruit rind. The line fell after her and then snapped taut, in the inrush of freezing no-air. There was a shuddering shock and the Empress strained at what anchored it, but in vain.

The men yelled and sucked air, clutching at their masks. Staring down through the vortex of blasting sand, Manco saw Mr. Morton's neoGothic pumping station with the stress telltale imbedded firmly in its roof, and several snarls of line wound around its decorative gables.

And he saw, and Mr. Morton saw too, the Heretic rising on the air like a blown leaf, mask gone, her clothing being scoured away but replaced like a second skin by a coating of sand and blood that froze, her hair streaming sidelong. Were her arms flung out in a pointless clutching reflex, or was she opening them in an embrace? Was her mouth wide in a cry of pain or of delight, as the red sand filled it?

And Manco watched, stunned, and saw what he saw, and Mr. Morton saw it too, and they both swore ever afterward to what they saw then, which was: that the Heretic turned her head, smiled at them, and *flew away into the tempest.*

"Take us back!" Mary shrieked. "Look, look, it's been blown halfway up the damn volcano, but it's still in one piece!"

The Brick dutifully came about and sent them hurtling back, through a cloud of sand and gravel that whined against the freighter's hull. "Looks like it's stuck on something," he said.

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"So maybe everybody's okay!" cried Mona. "Don't you think, Mum? Maybe they just rode inside like it was a ship, and nobody even got hurt?"

Mary and the Brick exchanged glances. "Certainly," said Mary. "Not to worry, dear."

But as they neared the drilling platform, it was painfully obvious that the Empress was still in trouble. Air plumed from a dozen cracks in the dome, and lay like a white mist along the underside, eddying where the occasional gust hit it. Several of the ag-units had broken or gone offline, causing it to sag groundward here and there, and even above the roar of the wind and through the walls of the cab, Mary could hear the Empress groaning in all its beams.

"Mum, there's a hole in the floor!" Mona screamed.

"I can see that. Hush, girl."

"But they'll all be dead inside!"

"Maybe not. They'd masks, hadn't they? Mr. Brick, I think we'd best see for ourselves."

The Brick just nodded, and made careful landing on the high plateau. They left Mona weeping in the cab and walked out, bent over against the wind, deflecting sand from their goggles with gloved hands.

"YOU GOT UNITS 4, 6, AND 10 DEAD, LOOKS LIKE," announced the Brick. "IF WE SHUT OFF 2, 8, AND 12, THAT OUGHT TO EVEN OUT THE STRESS AND LET HER DOWN SOME."

"WILL YOU GIVE ME A LEG UP, THEN, PLEASE?"

The Brick obliged, hoisting Mary to his shoulders, and there she balanced to just reach the shutoff switches, and, little by little, the Empress evened out, and settled, and looked not quite so much like a drunken dowager with her skirts over her head. Mary was just climbing down when Alf and Tiny Reg pulled up in their freighters. Chiring scrambled from Alf's cab and came running toward her with his cam held high.

"UNBELIEVABLE!" he said. "IT'S AN ACT OF THE GODS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! NARROW ESCAPE FROM CERTAIN DEATH! FREAK STORM DEPOSITING BUILDING INTACT ON VERY SITE INTENDED! MARS'S FIRST RECORDED MIRACLE!"

"SHUT THE DAMN THING OFF," Mary told the audience of Posterity. "WE'VE GOT PEOPLE INSIDE."

Chiring gulped, seeing the wreckage clearly for the first time. He ran for the Empress, where the Brick was already taking a crowbar to the airlock.

"MUM!" Rowan jumped from Tiny Reg's cab. She reached her mother just as Mona did the same, and they clung to Mary, weeping.

"HUSH YOUR NOISE!" Mary yelled. "WE'RE ALIVE, AREN'T WE? THE HOUSE IS HERE, ISN'T IT?"

"DAMN YOU, MUM, WHAT'LL WE BREATHE UP HERE?" Rowan yelled back. "HOW'LL WE LIVE? WE'LL FREEZE!"

"THE GODDESS WILL PROVIDE!"

Rowan said something atheistical and uncomplimentary then, and Mary would have slapped her if she hadn't been wearing a mask, and as they stood glaring at each other Mary noticed, far down the slope below Rowan, a traveling plume of grit coming up the road. It was the CeltCart.

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By the time the cart reached the plateau, Mary had armed herself with the Brick's crowbar, and marched out swinging it threateningly.

"COCHEVELOU, YOU'RE ON MY LAND," she said. She aimed a round blow at his head but it only glanced off, and he kept coming and wrapped his arms around her.

"DARLING GIRL, I'M BEGGING YOUR PARDON ON MY KNEES," said Cochevelou. Mary tried to take another swipe at him but dropped the crowbar.

"HOUND!" she gasped, "GO BACK TO EARTH, TO YOUR SOFT LIFE, AND I, ON MARS, WILL DRY MY TEARS, AND LIVE TO MAKE MY ENEMIES KNEEL!"

"AW, HONEY, YOU DON'T MEAN THAT," Cochevelou said. "HAVEN'T I GONE AND GIVEN IT ALL UP FOR YOUR SAKE? THE SPOILED DARLINGS CAN ELECT THEMSELVES ANOTHER CHIEFTAIN. I'M STAYING ON."

Mary peered over his shoulder at the CeltCart, and noted the preponderance of tools he had brought with him: anvil, portable forge, pig iron . . . and she thought of the thousand repairs the Empress's tanks and cantilevers would now require. Drawing a deep breath, she cried:

"OH, MY DEAR, I'M THE GLADDEST WOMAN THAT EVER WAS!"

"MUM! MUM!" Mona fought her way through the blowing sand. "THEY'VE COME ROUND!"

Mary broke from Cochevelou's embrace, and he followed her back to the cab of the Brick's freighter, where Manco and Mr. Morton were sitting up, or more correctly propping themselves up, weak as newborns, letting Alf swab BioGoo on their cuts and scrapes.

"ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, BOYS? WHERE'S THE HERETIC GONE?" Mary demanded.

Mr. Morton began to cry, but Manco stared at her with eyes like eggs and said, "There was a miracle, Mama."

Miracles are good for business, and so is the attraction of a hot bath in a frozen place of eternal dirt, and so are fine ales and beers in an otherwise joyless proletarian agricultural paradise. And free arethermal energy is very good indeed, if it's only free to *you* and costs others a packet, especially if they have to crawl and apologize to you and treat you like a lady in addition to paying your price for it.

Five years down the line, there was a new public house sign, what with the Queen of England being scoured away at last by relentless grit, and a fine new sign it was. Two grinning giants, one red and one black, supported between them a regal little lady in fine clothes. At her throat was the painted glory of a red diamond; in her right hand was a brimful mug, and her left hand beckoned the weary traveler to warmth and good cheer. Inside, in the steamy warmth, Sherpas drank their beer with butter.

Five years down the line, there were holocards on the back bar, all featuring little Mary De Wit of Amsterdam, whether screaming and red-faced for the camera in her first bath, or holding tight to Mr. De Wit's long hand while paddling her toes in the blue sea, or smiling like a sticky

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cherub before a massed extravagance of Solstice presents and Chanukah sweets, or solemn on her first day of school.

Five years down the line, there was a little shrine in the corner of the kitchen with a new image, a saint for the new faith. It resembled nothing so much as the hood ornament of an ancient Rolls-Royce, a sylph leaning forward into the wind, discreetly shrouded by slipstream short of actual nakedness. Its smile was distinctly unsettling. Its one eye was a red diamond.

Five years down the line, there was actually a Centre for the Performing Arts on Mars, and its thin black-clad manager put on very strange plays indeed, drawing the young intellectuals from what used to be Settlement Base, and there were pasty-faced disciples of Martian Drama (they called themselves the UltraViolets) creating a new art form in the rapidly expanding city on Mons Olympus.

Five years down the line at Mars One, there were long green fields spidering out along the Martian equator and even down to the lowlands, because that's what a good socialist work-ethic will get you, but up in Mars Two, there were domed rose gardens to the greater glory of Her who smiled serene in Her cloak of stars, Mother of miracles like roses that bloom in despite of bitter frost. O

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Feminism in SF — **June 10 @ 9:00 P.M. EST**
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MEMORY MAN

When for the first time we meet
You know we already made love
For I put that into your mind.
Takes but a moment's thought.
Why not again, sweet woman,
This evening, then, tonight?

When we walk into *Le Caprice*
I never before saw the waiters
Who know I'm a frequent patron.
Service, superb. You and I chat
As if there's no yesterday
When we weren't as close as now.

Quick wits and improvisation
Give me an idea of your life.
When I hail our taxi the driver's
Delighted to see me again.
Pretending to retie my shoelace,
I let you announce the address.

Up in a strange apartment
I pleasure a stranger's body
In ways that seem so familiar.
Such a skill, mine, to make
The world and his wife know me well.
Hell, any town's soon full of friends.

I no longer recall who it was
Whom I first swayed in this way
Nor damn it, damned, can I tell
Any more, and this is the scary
Part, for you cannot help me know,
Who I am, who I am, who I am.

—Ian Watson

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ON BOOKS

Norman Spinrad

CONTENT, CONSCIOUSNESS, STYLE

MANTA'S GIFT
by Timothy Zahn
Tor, $24.95 ISBN: 031287829X

THE APOCALYPSE DOOR
by James D. MacDonald
Tor, $22.95 ISBN: 0312869886

STORIES OF YOUR LIFE AND OTHERS
by Ted Chiang
Tor, $24.95 ISBN: 076530418X

DOWN AND OUT IN THE MAGIC KINGDOM
by Cory Doctorow
Tor $22.95 ISBN: 0765304368

TRANSCENSION
by Damien Broderick
Tor, $25.95 ISBN: 0765303698

When my first short story collection, *The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde,* was published in 1970, it was reviewed by Algis Budrys, then one of the two or three most influential critics in the science fiction field, and as far as I was concerned, the most interesting. In a generally favorable review, Budrys voiced one complaint, however, which was formative for not only my future stylistic angles of attack in my own fiction but for my critical stance in this essay.

Formative because I believed it at the time to be wrongheaded. Formative because although I found it wrongheaded, it called my conscious attention to something I had been doing all along without really thinking about it. Which, among other things, is an excellent argument for the value to working writers of intelligent analytical criticism, since in this case Budrys did me a world of good even though I didn't agree with his prescriptive conclusion.

For what Budrys basically said was that while this was a collection of generally good stories and I was a writer of promise, I had yet to mature, yet to find my own literary voice. Each of these stories, he complained, is written in a different style.

Complained?

As soon as I read what Budrys had written, I realized, as I had not realized before, that this was indeed what I had been doing. But as soon as I did, I also came to the conscious belief that this was what I *should* be doing. As far as I was concerned, Budrys' description of what I had been doing was entirely correct, but rather than being a flaw, it was a virtue. Everyone should be doing it.

But certainly not everyone was. And certainly even today not everyone is. Far from it.

In the SF field in those days, there was a dominant critical and editorial notion that persists and perhaps even remains dominant today, namely that science fiction and fantasy should be written in "transparent prose." That is, well-crafted but more or less standard prose that does not call attention to itself, which disappears into the woodwork, which is esthetically invisible.

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The argument for transparent prose is twofold:

First, that the inherent content of speculative fiction is outré enough as it is, distanced from the readers' reality already, so that telling the story in non-standard prose would only confuse things further and make readers' psychological immersion in the fictional reality more problematic.

Second, that the goal of fiction, and not only speculative fiction, should be the creation in readers' minds of the illusion that they are experiencing the story *directly,* rather than reading words printed on paper—hence that the prose itself should "disappear" psychologically from the process, should therefore become "transparent."

The first part of the argument seemed to me then and seems to me now to imply that speculative fiction, or, to be less high-falutin' about it, science fiction and fantasy or "SF," is a subliterature— "littérature de la gare" as the French would have it, "trivialitatliteratur" as the Germans put it in one brutally clear noun of many syllables—pulp-descended entertainment for the unwashed masses who are not going to appreciate the pleasures of prose for its own sake. Literary television in which the story is everything and the style in which it is told adds nothing to the enjoyment of the reading experience. The champions of this point of view celebrate SF's so-called "pulp tradition" when they are taking seriously this proposition that SF should not take itself too seriously and declare that "SF should get back in the gutter where it belongs" when they are not.

This, I would contend, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when writers, rather than critics or fans, take it to heart, for if writers believe that SF should not partake of the uniquely literary pleasures of so called "high literature" then they won't try to engage and entertain readers on such a literary level. And their stuff will indeed retain loyalty to the stylistic limits of the pulp tradition.

The second part of the argument, however, is much more interesting, at least to those of us who would create fiction, dealing as it does with the psychic and sensorial nature of the reading experience itself and its relationship to the prose line that is the writer's only means of creating it.

It is certainly true that much fine or even great literature has been written in what would enthusiastically be deemed transparent prose by the champions thereof. It is also true that many writers of merit have fallen into the literary trap of having what was once a unique and powerful prose-line ossify into a mode applied to everything they write and thus all-too-easily parodied, and all the more so when the work that first makes their mark is written in such an idiosyncratic style.

I came reasonably close to making that mistake after *Bug Jack Barron,* which was written in an extreme, and, so the critics said, effective, style not seen in speculative fiction before. I had people telling me I should continue to write in this style that I had invented, and I myself wondered what the hell I could do for an encore.

But Algis Budrys' review of the short story collection that appeared a year after *Bug Jack Barron* clarified my thinking, not because I agreed with him, but

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because I was forced to enter into a dialectic with what he had said about the variability of my style inside my own head.

It didn't take much thought to see that Budrys was entirely right in descriptive terms: the stories collected in *The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde* were indeed written in different styles and there was nothing that really emerged therein as "Norman Spinrad's style." And then I realized that this was also true of the style of *Bug Jack Barron*.

This was a hard and not entirely pleasant realization. I was twenty-nine, after all. *Bug Jack Barron* was my major success—I had never really written prose on such a level before. I knew damned well that the style I had developed in that novel was a very powerful instrument, and if I didn't, I had people telling me that it was and that I should keep using it.

But what Budrys' review confronted me with was that I had not developed this style *in Bug Jack Barron* but *for Bug Jack Barron*. And this was a very, very important distinction.

Bug Jack Barron is a novel in which much of the action that the readers must experience consists of what is happening "on television." So I had to create the illusion in the sensoriums of the readers that they were "watching television," and the only medium available to do this was of course prose. The medium might not really be the message and a straightforward "message" might be conveyed by any number of media, but I was trying to *induce a state of consciousness that mimicked that created by a medium other than that which I was constrained to employ.* And that meant that transparent prose could not do the job, that I had to alter the prose medium to do it.

That was why the novel was written in the style it was. And, to a much less extreme degree, that was why the earlier stories in *The Last Hurrah of the Golden Horde* were written in a variety of styles. *The demands of the content determined the style of the prose.*

My next SF novel was *The Iron Dream,* written in the invented voice of Adolf Hitler, and it would have been utterly idiotic to have written such a book in the style of *Bug Jack Barron,* and vice versa.

And this seeming digression into my own early literary history is my refutation of the second part of the argument for writing SF in transparent prose, the contention that transparent prose allows the readers the illusion that they are experiencing the story directly rather than reading words printed on paper, whereas idiosyncratic prose, by calling attention to itself, destroys this illusion of sensory immediacy.

Au contraire, I would contend, when it comes to speculative fiction, at least speculative fiction that tries to take itself seriously. Serious (or even not so serious) speculative fiction must be based on at least one speculative element, something—be it large or small, that is alien to the readers' experience of their present consensus reality. That's what makes it speculative fiction—some speculative alteration in the external universe of the story. But in the real world, alterations in the external surround invariably create alterations in the interior world of the entities embedded in that surround.

Altered reality creates altered consciousness.

How can it not?

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Fictional characters embedded in a speculative reality will have consciousnesses different in ways large or small from that of the reader. And the only medium for portraying such altered styles of consciousness (or anything else in the story) is of course prose. So the only really effective means of conveying such a character's altered style of consciousness is altered prose style. Which is why transparent prose seldom makes it.

Take something like Timothy Zahn's *Manta's Gift*.

Matt Rainey is a paraplegic given a chance of renewed mobility by, in effect, having his brain and spinal attachments transplanted into the embryo of a Qanska. These are huge "airborne" sentients swimming in the gaseous "ocean" of the atmosphere of Jupiter. Rainey is sent on this mission by the human powers that be because they believe that the Qanska come from elsewhere and therefore must have some kind of starship drive.

The story follows Rainey, who adopts the name Manta as a Qanska, as he grows to maturity as a Qanska with his human memories intact, pursuing the mission to find the stardrive, while gradually becoming more and more acculturated to Qanska culture, slowly changing loyalty and primary identity, until he becomes a Qanska at heart.

Zahn has done his scientific homework. Zahn has created a well-detailed Jovian ecosystem, Qanska biology, and Qanska culture. He's got a complex and interesting political story line leading the reader through this 427 page novel, though we never really see the future human culture. He's got some believable and interesting major and minor characters. The story moves well. It's a rapid read full of action that carries the plot admirably. It's good more or less hard science fiction.

But. . . .

But for those who have read it, *Manta's Gift* suffers by comparison to Poul Anderson's classic novelette, "Call Me Joe," which covers virtually the same thematic ground of a transmogrified human agent becoming a true Jovian—though in Anderson's story, written decades ago, it all takes place on an imagined high gravity Jovian surface, rather than in an atmospheric ocean.

While Anderson's style in "Call Me Joe" is by no means radically idiosyncratic, as with much of his fiction, it is not quite standardly transparent either. Anderson often uses "poetic" techniques like rhythm and cadence to convey mood and ambiance, and pays very careful attention to conveying sensory detail, not merely "painting word pictures," but "word sounds" and "word smells" and "word sensory feelings."

This enables him to take the reader deep inside the consciousness of his protagonist by rendering the style of that consciousness. Or rather the *styles* of that consciousness, for the thematic essence of "Call Me Joe" is the stepwise transformation of the protagonist's consciousness from that of a human inside the body of a Jovian to that of a human *become* a Jovian on a psychological, moral, and even spiritual level.

Stripped of the political subplots, the essential core of *Manta's Gift* is pretty much the same thing. But where Anderson conveys the psychological transformation of a human into a Jovian via subtle stylistic

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mutation of the prose line describing his protagonist's perception of the Jovian environment and his mutating reaction to it, Zahn doesn't do this.

He doesn't seem to even try. Perhaps this is wisdom on his part. Poul Anderson might not have been a radical stylistic innovator but he certainly was a very careful and knowing stylistic craftsman, utilizing rhythm, cadence, metaphor, image, to convey not only the phenomenological realities of outré environments, but their effects on the consciousnesses embedded therein.

In *Manta's Gift,* Timothy Zahn demonstrates that he is a skilled and interesting writer of science fiction in terms of imaginative extrapolation, straightforward physical description, and even political sophistication, but he is simply not a stylist on the level of Poul Anderson. Nor are the majority of writers turning out perfectly acceptable science fiction.

But in *Manta's Gift,* Zahn has chosen to tell much the same story as Anderson did in "Call Me Joe," albeit with many more characters and plot complications and at much greater length. And because this is a tale of the transformation of consciousness and identity it suffers not only by comparison to Poul Anderson's story but by failing to convey that transformation with psychological realism.

Zahn employs the same transparent prose line throughout, a prose line that in other circumstances might be perfectly serviceable. But because he does so, his Rainey remains a human in a Qanska suit throughout. And, however interesting and well worked-out the Qanska biology and society are (and they are that), the aliens themselves just are not quite convincingly alien, and therefore the story that Zahn is telling of the deep transformation of a human into one of them just doesn't come across on more than a surface plot level.

Ted Chiang, on the other hand, is that current rarity, an SF writer who has made himself a significant literary reputation without publishing a novel, on short fiction alone, indeed on only seven stories, all of which are collected in *Stories of Your Life and Others*. There was a time when this was not only relatively common, but the traditional career trajectory to getting one's first novel published. One thinks of writers like Theodore Sturgeon, Ray Bradbury, Harlan Ellison, who not only made their reps as major short story writers before publishing any novels, but whose short fiction is considered their best work for the most part even afterward.

Chiang is no romantic prose poet like Bradbury, no master of psychological depth and illuminating story line like Sturgeon, no inferno of burning passion and modern mythmaker like Ellison. And what is more, or less, he has made his reputation with a comparative handful of stories.

How?

Well, for one thing, these seven stories are very well structured, and not just in plot terms, but in terms of *form,* which is not quite the same thing.

Indeed, in terms of conventional plot and story, they are in a "pulp tradition" sense rather thin. Several of them rely simply on some terminal revelation and the lead-up to it, like "Tower of Babylon," "Liking What You See: a Documentary," and "Division By Zero," a mode that

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really only works at all with speculative fiction. Some are in these terms little more than metaphysical speculations. But all of them are formally interesting, more complicated on this level than the stories the form is conveying, and in a Borgesian sense, as how could stories with titles like "Story of Your Life" and "Seventy-Two Letters" not be?

Then, too, and most significant for current purposes, while Chiang is no stylist in the sense of Jack Vance or Ray Bradbury, no prose poet, not a writer whose prose itself is a self-contained esthetic pleasure, he most certainly is a master of prose as a precise instrument, or rather a well-stocked toolbox of instruments, subtly choosing and coolly crafting the right style not just to convey the particular content but to suit the particular form.

Chiang's stylistic range is already nearly as broad as that of Sturgeon. And the variations are almost as subtle, and of course far wider than, say, Bradbury or Vance, master stylists in quite another mode, who always write in the same delectable voice—indeed, writers one tends to read *for* their styles, which are more memorable, more enjoyable than either their speculations or whatever story they may be telling.

Though this is not radically idiosyncratic prose, it is not exactly transparent prose either, but functional prose in a kind of Bauhaus manner; prose subtly adapted to and generated by not just content but form, just as Chiang's form follows thematic function. Thus the greatest strength of these stories in not in their plots or characterizations or even in their ideas, however interesting, but in the unity of style and form with which Ted Chiang conveys them.

Sometimes, however, a certain deliberate dissonance between content and style, content and form, can be rather delicious. A perfect example is *The Apocalypse Door* by James D. MacDonald.

Formwise, this is more or less a straightforward spy novel, with agencies like the CIA and others in Byzantine conflict over matters and an artifact of dire cosmic importance, Bondish gizmos, action hugger mugger, crosses and double crosses, and Peter Crossman, secret agent, fighting and conniving his way through the story, accompanied by his not entirely trustworthy sidekick and an even less trustworthy beautiful and very well-armed and lethal femme fatale hitlady.

MacDonald narrates the whole thing through the mostly first-person viewpoint of Crossman, a wisecracking, sardonic, hard-boiled dick quite deliberately reminiscent of Raymond Chandler and generations of his imitators and acolytes.

The content, however . . .

Take a deep breath.

Crossman (name quite deliberate), though once an agent of the CIA, is now an agent of the Knights Templar—and yes, he is a priest. The hitlady in question is "Sister Mary Magdalene of the Special Action Executive of the Poor Clares. The fun nun with the gun." The major bad guy organization is the Knights of the Teutonic Order, though there are more ultimate Dark Forces behind them.

On a stylistic, plot, and action level, *The Apocalypse Door* is a straightforward spy versus spy thriller, with plenty of shoot 'em ups, technical descriptions of

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weapons, torture, and what at first at least appears to be a science fictional twist. Father Peter and Sister Mary litter the landscape with more dead bodies than I care to count.

But Peter Crossman, being a priest, labors under certain constraints that never trammeled the doings of James Bond. Under the weird rules of *The Apocalypse Door,* he may use all manner of weaponry and may lie and double cross and kill, but, since he is a priest, he must at least offer to hear the final confession of his enemies and grant them absolution. And, since much of what he does is a mortal sin, he must confess and receive absolution himself, lest he die with a mortal sin on his soul and go straight to Hell without passing Purgatory.

The impression that might have been given by this thumbnail description to the contrary, *The Apocalypse Door* is *not* really played for laughs, though it has a consistent sardonically humorous prose line via the wiseguy narration of Father Peter Crossman. It is not really fantasy on a literary level, since all this Catholic versus Forces of Satan stuff is played on a hard-boiled dick level. It is not quite science fiction either.

This novel is, well . . . the damnedest thing.

There are intercut third person sections dealing with Crossman's previous identity as a CIA agent in Latin America, and these are quite realistic, not to say rather harrowing. The seeming SF elements that turn out to be more theological in the end are dealt with on a more or less credible hard SF level, and indeed even the struggle between the agents of Cosmic Good and the agents of Satan have the same sort of science fictional realism.

This novel, which deals with Satan, Catholic theology, the Apocalypse, and other matters that lack, shall we say, a certain phenomenological verisimilitude for the majority of modern readers, nevertheless does not have the *feel* of fantasy at all. It has the feel of an otherwise more or less conventional hard-boiled spy thriller while on a content level serving up what most of us would deem out and, out fantasy, and it is *not* a satire of either Catholic theology or the hard-boiled spy thriller.

For me at least, that is its unique charm.

And it is a textbook example of how a choice of style quite at variance with the conventional expectations that would be implied by the content (or vice versa) completely changes and dominates the reading experience, and, in the case of *The Apocalypse Door,* to powerfully entertaining effect.

If James D. MacDonald's use of dissonance between style and content is bizarrely unique, in *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom,* Cory Doctorow does something more science fictionally traditional, mutating more or less standard English diction and form by inserting a judicious dose of futuristic slang into the first-person narration of his future tense protagonist. There's nothing wrong with this, but here it doesn't entirely succeed, not because it's obtrusive, but because, given the content, Doctorow is too timid in pushing the edge of both the thematic and stylistic envelope.

Doctorow's capsule bio on the galleys portrays him as a Silicon Valley cybervisionary type, and the future of *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* is a kind of cy-

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berutopia that calls itself the "Bitchun (Bitchin') Society," where poverty has apparently been abolished along with money (or vice versa in this dream of abundance for all), and status is counted in something called "Whuffie," a kind of instant electronic individual karmic Nielsen rating determined by people's opinion of you at any given moment. The citizens of the Bitchun Society have instant electronic access to all sort of data banks, virtual realities, and so forth via hardware implants, and via these instrumentalities, death has been abolished.

Well, sort of.

Cloning has advanced to the point where backup bodies are no problem, and, as long as you back up your cerebral memory banks via the implants, you can die any number of times, be downloaded into a new body, and boogie on with no harm done except the loss of the memories of whatever happened to you between your latest backup and your latest death. Some people "deadhead" into the future out of boredom. Some even do it to avoid boring airplane rides.

Now some people trying to take such a set-up seriously might wonder if such a process really conveys life extension or near immortality, which is to say whether reproducing the software running on the meatware of your old brain and downloading it into the brain of a new body really provides continuity of personality, not to mention untidy questions of the "soul," and several science fiction writers have attempted to wrestle with this deep question deeply.

But to keep it on a fairly surface level:

Given Doctorow's premises that personality, consciousness, soul, whatever you choose to call that which runs on your cerebral meatware, can be backed up in a computer, and given that your body can be cloned, there is nothing to prevent the creation of multiple clones into which multiple copies of the "software backup" can be downloaded.

So which one is "you"?

All of them?

None of them?

Doctorow steers well clear of this one, which, after all, once brought up or at least made implicit in a novel, would seem to have to become by its very nature the central thematic concern. The closest he comes is having his first person narrator, Jules, briefly ponder the question of continuity of consciousness now and again before plunging back into the main storyline.

The main story of *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* takes place in the Magic Kingdom—that is, Disneyworld—now run by "ad-hocs," syndicalist communes dedicated to running and maintaining individual attractions. Jules is a member of the Haunted Mansion ad-hoc, with a preservationist credo of running the Mansion with more or less the original audioanimatronics. The antagonists, led by Debra, are the members of the Hall of the Presidents ad-hoc, who not only have updated the works to the latest direct virtual reality technology, but seek to do likewise to the Haunted Mansion.

And that is the basic plot dynamic. Debra and her minions plot to take over the Haunted Mansion and Jules and some allies scheme to prevent her and engage in various actions to sabotage the works of the Hall of the Presidents.

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If this story seems rather trivial and flimsy in the light of the society Doctorow has set up and the thematic questions it implies, well, at least by my lights it is. It's a sort of a disney of the novel it could have and should have been, taking place in a disney of Disneyworld, and it can't get more disney than that.

After all, here we have a post-capitalist utopia in which status is conferred by Whuffie, which is not much more than how cool how many people think you are, where people either live forever or are replaced by serial simulacrums depending on the metaphysical position from which you regard the process. Yet the main action is centered around the fates of two attractions in Disneyworld.

Then too, given all these implants, direct connection to virtual realities and data banks, serial deaths and resurrections, if one is going to take such a phenomenological set-up seriously, the denizens thereof are certainly going to have consciousnesses radically different from our own, and if a writer wants to avoid dealing with this on a stylistic level, he should not opt for a first person narration by one of the denizens in question. Jules himself is a kind of disney of what a consciousness imbedded in such a surround might really be like, and the style with which Doctorow portrays his inner reality is pretty much standard twenty-first century English tarted up with jargon.

Now don't get me wrong, Doctorow does a good job of providing action and ambiance, and even characterization up to a point, and the novel does carry you along on that level. And when Jules gets his implants bollixed so that he hasn't backed up during much of the exciting plot and then hesitates because he doesn't want to lose the memories thereof, I began to both hope and fear that in the dénouement Doctorow was going to confront the real central issues.

Hope because this was where the story seemed to be taking Jules. Fear because I had the uneasy feeling that I knew where it was going to end up, as this sort of thing usually does, in the structurally neat and emotionally reassuring but essentially vacuous rejection of all this post-human stuff in favor of the affirmation of natural humanity as God intended.

Without giving too much away, wrong on both counts.

Unfortunately, Cory Doctorow never does seriously confront the deep issue he has raised, namely the continuity of consciousness in such a transhuman situation, just as his protagonist never really grapples with it either. But to his credit, he doesn't fall into the tiresome bathetic fallacy of rejecting all transhumanity in uncritical support of good old life-as-we-know-it, either.

In *Transcension,* Damien Broderick tackles all of this and much more head on. Broderick is also the author of *The Spike,* a non-fiction, or, if you will, non-fictional science fiction, book in turn inspired by the non-fictional science fictional speculation of the science fiction writer Vernor Vinge, the basic premise of which is that sometime in the twenty-first century, advances in nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, and who now knows what else, will combine to produce "the Spike": a sudden near-infinite upward evolution in the technocybersphere producing not merely artificial intelli-

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gences that will transcend humanity but that will transcend humanity so utterly and so completely that not only will humans be unable to comprehend what has happened but, if such primitive meatware intelligences do survive, may not even *know* it has happened.

As regular readers of these essays may know, I was not particularly impressed by *The Spike*. But though *Transcension* deals thematically and centrally with the concepts I found dubious in *The Spike,* it is quite another matter. Primarily because Damien Broderick is, after all, a novelist, and a good one, and *Transcension* is a novel and not a screed. And while the concept of the Spike may be extremely questionable stuff as futurology or prophecy, it certainly is prime material for a science fiction novel, which needs to succeed as neither.

In *Transcension,* we have not one future utopia, if that is the word, but two: high tech, and low tech. Well, sort of.

The "high tech" society is that of the "Joyous Relinquishment," better understood as a middle tech society of isolated "Metro polises" where the highest technologies, those that it was feared would lead to the replacement of humanity by hyperadvanced Artificial Intelligences, à la the Spike, have been prohibited. Its citizens have unlimited lifespans thanks to its high technology, and so adolescence lasts until the age of thirty, in biological terms thanks to metabolic tinkering, and in legal terms that keep "penders" in thrall to their parents until that age with effectively no legal rights.

The low tech society is that of the Valley of the God of Our Choice, a forthrightly reactionary utopia in which everyone can choose their own god or goddess to worship and technology, such as it isn't, is limited to the level more or less acceptable to the present-day Amish.

The van Gogh Metro polis has made some kind of deal to dig a tunnel for high speed supersonic trains under the Valley and then for a ventilation shaft to break its pristine surface. Amanda, daughter of the "Legal" who put together this deal, is a pender approaching thirty, a thrill seeker whose ambition is to become a major "Mall god" by virtue of doing some loony deed that will give her big league bragging rights. This turns out to be dropping onto a passing train. When this doesn't work, she is hauled before Magistrate Mohammed Abdel-Malik, who was frozen upon his death in the twenty-first century and revived whenever this is.

Abdel-Malik places her under fairly stringent restrictions, but Amanda persists, using a "liar bee," a tiny flying speaker and microphone equipped robot, to penetrate the Valley and cozen someone into aiding her and her pal Vikram to fly into the Valley via high tech hang gliders so that they can drop down the vent shaft onto a passing train, restricted to low speed while passing under the enclave.

The someone turns out to be Mathewmark, your typical Valley boy. But when they drop down the shaft and he follows, the whole adventure ends catastrophically with Vikram dead and Mathewmark injured to the point where a major part of his brain has to be replaced by an electronic prosthesis that skirts the edge of the rules of the Joyous Relinquishment and ends up giving him unprecedented cy-

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borg link powers with the machineries of the polis.

This is the basic set-up, and this is more or less the action of more or less the first half of a 345 page novel. It is pretty slow stuff, bordering on tedium, and *Transcension* doesn't really pick up speed, drive, pace, and interest until Mathewmark exits the hospital in the van Gogh Metro polis.

On a story level, the first half of the novel is a kind of throwback to the dim distant days of Hugo Gernsback and *Ralph 124C 41+*, with Broderick walking the reader through the details, technological and cultural, of his future societies via the viewpoints of Amanda and Mathewmark hugger-muggering through the drop-through-the-shaft plot, her conflicts with her parents and Abdel-Malik, his unrequited love for his Valley girl sweetheart.

But Broderick is a real novelist such as Gernsback and his vintage of SF writers never were, and what rescues the first half of *Transcension* from terminal tedium is what he does with style.

He narrates the first half mainly through the contrasting first person viewpoints of Amanda and Mathewmark, with a bit of Abdel-Malik, a bit of omniscient author here and there, and uses quite different prose styles to convey quite different styles of consciousness, different world-views, different realities, if you will.

At random:

Amanda:

"Was depressing, truly boring way to spend night. Amused self with compactification of n-manifold classes, fiddling as usual with Cohn-Vossen inequality. Got frustrated and nowhere. Next day in court was worse. Mr. Abdel-Malik, principal Magistrate for van Gogh Metro polis enclave, is very calm gentleman with soft sinister tone to voice. Heard society ladies find quite sexy, in right context. Plainly have never heard him speaking to miscreant who threatened freighter system by attempting to web subadult body to Maglev train ready to thunder through new Metro-to-coast tube at speed sound."

Mathewmark:

"Old Man Legrand is Sweetcharity's grandfather. Since the dark night when her parents were carried away in the floods, beautiful Sweetcharity has lived with him. He takes his grandfatherly responsibilities very seriously, old man Legrand. There isn't a girl in the Valley who is more closely supervised than the orphan Sweetcharity Legrand. Which makes being in love with her a bit difficult. . . . Old man Legrand is not above waving a long-handled billhook at folks he doesn't like the look of. And it's no good going on about the God of his Choice is meant to be a pacifist."

There's more. The novel opens with the first person point of view of an Artificial Intelligence who will be revealed as dominant in the second half:

"I sit on a hill

I(re-entrant selfware identity operator)

sit on (instantaneous location slice on search trajectory)

a (existential pointer in exfoliating context sheaf)

hill (local optimum in restricted search space)

Call me Aleph."

And so forth. Thematically, *Transcension* is a novel about consciousness and its transformations. Math-

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ewmark's consciousness is first transformed by his contact with Amanda in his own Valley, then by forced insertion into Amanda's external context, and then, via his augments, into something approaching the transhuman. Amanda's consciousness is transformed by her shift from "pender" to adult; by the abrupt engineered biochemical change, but also, and most interesting in the current context, by her shift from the argot of the pender to the more formal and rhythmically different prose style of her culture's adulthood.

Broderick not only knows that the only way to convey different styles of consciousness to the reader is by adopting different prose styles—the *characters'* prose style, not "his own"—in which to render their thoughts, not only demonstrates that knowledge admirably here, but in the rather sudden alteration in the style of Amanda's first person narration, demonstrates that the prose style of thought shapes consciousness as much as consciousness shapes linguistic style.

For me at least, this is what held my interest in the first half of *Transcension,* which otherwise seemed rather slow and tedious. In the second half of the novel, when various viewpoints begin to come together and sometimes even merge, when Amanda evolves and Mathewmark even more so, when Abdel-Malik begins to learn the truth behind the whole set-up via more and more intimate contact with the Aleph, when the Aleph comes more front and center, and the whole thing moves toward the transcendent "Spike" that the title hints at, these multiple prose styles and the evolving formal complexity within which Broderick employs them become critical.

Transcension is a novel that simply could not work at all if Broderick had tried to write it in a single prose style, less still if that prose style were so-called "transparent prose." Which, in the final analysis, is not really "transparent" or culturally neutral at all, but the consensus style of a specific language, a specific culture, a specific time, as a reading of Chaucer or the anonymous author of *Beowulf* or Shakespeare will readily enough demonstrate, the styles of all of which were "transparent" to readers embedded in the same culture at the same time.

Transcension, being a novel centrally concerned not only with consciousnesses that transcend our own, but even with realities that transcend our own, may be an extreme example, but science fiction in general is the literature that deals with transformed consciousnesses in transformed realities, and more highly evolved ones more often than not.

Were Chaucer writing *Neuromancer* could he have done so in the standard transparent English prose of his day? Would Shakespeare's Elizabethan English have sufficed for *The Stars My Destination?*

Merely to ask such a question is to answer it.

There are more things in anyone's future than may be dreamt of in the transparent prose of the present. And there always will be. O

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

WesterCon is the big event this time around. As for me, I'll be at ReaderCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

JUNE 2003

6–8—**DucKon.** For info, write: **Box 4843, Wheaton IL 60189.** Or phone: **(973) 242-5999** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) www.duckon.org. (E-mail) info@duckon.org.** Con will be held in: Lincolnwood (Chicago) IL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Radisson. Guests will include: T. Huff, P. D. Breeding-Black, J. Rittenhouse, B. & B. Sutton.

13–14—**Deadly Ink. www.deadlyink.com. pab@nac.net.** Sheraton, Parsippany NJ. Mystery fiction.

13–15—**Bloody Words. www.bloodywords.com.** Lord Elgin Hotel, Ottawa ON. Engel, Wright, McDermid. Mysteries.

13–15—**BuffyCon. (734) 534-6580 (fax). www.buffycon.org.** Holiday Inn, Saddlebrook NJ. Guests TBA. Theme: guess.

13–15—**Anime MidAtlantic. www.animemidatlantic.com.** Holiday Inn Edger Ctr., Richmond VA. R. Aldrich, A. Callwood.

13–15—**PortCon. www.portconmaine.com.** Best Western, S. Portland ME. D. Watts, J. Stowell, Karavitis. Anime/gaming.

13–15—**YuriCon. www.yuricon.org.** Hilton, Newark NJ. J. Robertson, R. Takashima, K. Williams, Bennett. Adult anime.

14–15—**Creation. (818) 409-0960. www.creationent.com.** Plano Center, Dallas TX. Commercial media-oriented event.

20–22—**The Harvest, Box 3431, Glasgow G62 8WE, UK. www.s3events.co.uk/buffy.** Paragon Hotel, London England.

20–22—**Starfleet Region 3 Summit, Box 1756, Coppel TX 75016. summit2003@region3.com.** College Station TX. Trek.

20–22—**Trek Expo, 2130 S. Sheridan, Tulsa OK 74129. (918) 838-3388. www.starbase21ok.com.** Expo Square.

20–23—**Monster Bash, Box 643, Latrobe PA 15650. (724) 532-5226.** Days Inn, Butler PA. S. Karloff, Savini. Horror.

20–23—**FanimeCon, Box 8068, San Jose CA 95155. www.fanime.com.** Westin & Conv. Ctr., Santa Clara CA. Ikuhara.

21–22—**Trek Celebration, 4623 Aminda, Shawnee Mission KS 66226. (913) 441-9405.** Radisson O'Hare, Chicago IL.

22–Aug. 2—**Clarion West, 340 15th Av. E. #350, Seattle WA 98112. (206) 322-9083.** Writers' workshop.

26–29—**MidWestCon, c/o Oakes, 5627 Antoninus Dr., Cincinnati OH 45238. www.cfg.org.** New York NY. G. Weisman.

26–29—**Origins, 80 Garden Ctr. #16, Broomfield CO 80020. (303) 469-3277.** Hyatt & Con Ctr., Columbus OH. Gaming.

27–29—**Gathering of Gargoyles, 19500 Monterey Ave., Cleveland OH 44119. www.gargoyles-fans.org.** New York.

28–29—**Sci Fi Expo, Box 941111, Plano TX 75094. (972) 578-0213.** Plano Center, Plano (Dallas) TX. Mainly dealers.

JULY 2003

3–6—**WesterCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. (206) 723-9906. www.wester56.org.** SeaTac WA. B. Sterling, C. Willis.

3–6—**Anime Expo, 530 Showers Dr. #7, PMB 287, Mt. View CA 94040. www.anime-expo.org.** Con Ctr., Anaheim CA.

3–6—**Haven, Box 241232, Montgomery AL 36124. www.haven-con.com.** Embassy Suites. H. Jefferson, V. Hey. Horror.

4–6—**InConJunction, Box 3512, Bloomington IN 47402. www.inconjunction.org.** Sheraton, Indianapolis IN. E. Moon.

4–6—**ConVergence, 1437 Marshall Ave. #203, St. Paul MN 55104. (651) 647-3487.** Radisson, Bloomington MN. Flint.

11–13—**ReaderCon, Box 38-1246, Cambridge MA 02238. www.readercon.org.** Marriott, Burlington MA. Written SF.

11–13—**Shore Leave, Box 6809, Towson MD 21285. www.shore-leave.com.** Marriott, Hunt Valley MD. M. Sirtis. Trek.

11–13—**Toronto Trek, Box 7097, Toronto ON M5W 1X7. www.icomm.ca/tcon.** Regal Constellation. Marsters, E. Gray.

11–13—**ConStruction, 63 Providence Way, Waterbeach CF5 9QH, UK. www.dragonevents.ltd.uk.** Cardiff. Con mgt.

AUGUST 2003

28–Sep. 1—**TorCon 3, Box 3, Stn. A, Toronto ON M5W 1A2. www.torcon3.on.ca.** Freas. WorldCon. C$250+/US$170+.

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